

**YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND ITS
POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES (ON THE CASE OF ARMENIAN
YOUTH IN YEREVAN)***

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Abstract. To discover the geopolitical orientation and opinions of the Armenia's youth regarding the war in Ukraine in the context of regional security issues, a sociological study was conducted in Yerevan and Armenia's provinces in 2022. It was carried out by specialists from the Faculty of Sociology of the Yerevan State University, in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation office in Armenia, and Socies expert center. The study aimed to discover the youth's perceptions of the reasons for the war in Ukraine, which started on February 24, 2022, including its possible impact on the region. The research was carried out from October 22, 2022 to November 22, 2022 with youth (18-35 age group) residing in Yerevan (the capital of Armenia) and all provinces of Armenia, using the focus group discussion method. In this paper, we discuss conclusions drawn from focus group discussions with Yerevan residents. The perceptions of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict by Armenia's youth refers to its geopolitical nature, to the interests of Russia, NATO, EU, USA, Turkey in the post-Soviet space, as well as to personal qualities, approaches, and issues of the leaders of Russia and Ukraine. In general, according to Armenian young people, Armenia should remain as neutral as possible in its position on the war in Ukraine, taking no side in this conflict.

Key words: *War in Ukraine, Russia, Karabakh War, youth, Armenia, perceptions, interests, regional security*

**ՀԱՅ ԵՐԻՏԱՍԱՐԴՆԵՐԻ ՊԱՏԿԵՐԱՑՈՒՄՆԵՐՆ ՈՒԿՐԱԻՆԱԿԱՆ
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Ամփոփում: Տարածաշրջանային անվտանգության հիմնախնդիրների համա-

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տեքստում ուկրաինական պատերազմի վերաբերյալ հայ երիտասարդության աշխարհաքաղաքական կողմնորոշումներն ու հայացքները բացահայտելու նպատակով Երևանի պետական համալսարանի սոցիոլոգիայի ֆակուլտետի մասնագետների կողմից «Կոնրադ Ադենաուեր հիմնադրամի» հայաստանյան գրասենյակի և «Սոցիես» փորձագիտական-վերլուծական կենտրոնի հետ Երևանում և ՀՀ մարզերում 2022 թ. հոկտեմբերի 22-ից նոյեմբերի 22-ն իրականացվել է սոցիոլոգիական հետազոտություն: Նպատակն էր բացահայտել երիտասարդների պատկերացումներն ուկրաինական պատերազմի պատճառների, զարգացման հնարավոր սցենարների, տարածաշրջանի և հատկապես Հայաստանի անվտանգության վրա ուկրաինական հակամարտության և պատերազմի հավանական ազդեցության մասին: Ուսումնասիրությունն իրականացվել է Երևանում և Հայաստանի բոլոր մարզերում բնակվող երիտասարդների (18-35 տարեկան) շրջանում՝ ֆոկուս-խմբային քննարկումների մեթոդով: Սույն հոդվածում ներկայացնում ենք Երևանի երիտասարդների հետ ֆոկուս-խմբային քննարկումների արդյունքները: Երևանահանակ երիտասարդության կողմից ուկրաինական հակամարտության ընկալումը կապված է դրա աշխարհաքաղաքական բնույթի, հետխորհրդային տարածքում Ռուսաստանի, ՆԱՏՕ-ի, ԵՄ-ի, ԱՄՆ-ի, Թուրքիայի շահերի, ինչպես նաև Ռուսաստանի և Ուկրաինայի ղեկավարների անձնային որակների, մոտեցումների և տեսակետների հետ: Ընդհանուր առմամբ, ըստ հայ երիտասարդության, Հայաստանը պետք է հնարավորինս չեզոք մնա ուկրաինական պատերազմի հարցում՝ չսատարելով որևէ կողմի:

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ВОСПРИЯТИЯ АРМЯНСКОЙ МОЛОДЕЖЬЮ ВОЙНЫ НА УКРАИНЕ И ЕЕ ВОЗМОЖНЫХ ПОСЛЕДСТВИЙ (НА ПРИМЕРЕ МОЛОДЕЖИ ЕРЕВАНА)

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Аннотация. *Для выяснения геополитической ориентации и взглядов армянской молодежи на войну в Украине в контексте вопросов региональной безопасности, в 2022 году в Ереване и областях Армении было проведено социологическое исследование. Его провели специалисты факультета социологии Ереванского государственного университета в сотрудничестве с офисом Фонда Конрада Аденауэра в Армении и экспертно-аналитическим центром Социес. Исследование направлено на выявление представлений молодежи о причинах войны в Украине, в том числе о ее возможном влиянии на регион. Исследование проводилось с 22 октября 2022 года по 22 ноября 2022*

года среди молодежи (возрастная группа 18-35 лет), проживающей в Ереване (столице Армении) и во всех областях Армении, с использованием метода фокус-групповых обсуждений. В данной статье мы обсуждаем выводы, сделанные в ходе дискуссий в фокус-группах с жителями Еревана. Восприятие украинского конфликта молодежью Армении связано с его геополитической природой, с интересами России, НАТО, ЕС, США, Турции на постсоветском пространстве, а также с личностными качествами, подходами и взглядами лидеров России и Украины. В целом, по мнению армянской молодежи, Армения должна оставаться максимально нейтральной в своей позиции в отношении войны на Украине, не занимая ничьей стороны в этом конфликте.

Ключевые слова: война в Украине, Россия, карабахская война, молодежь, Армения, представления, интересы, региональная безопасность

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The war in Ukraine that started on February 24, 2022, was a consequence of fundamental problems in the Russian-Ukrainian political relations, the escalation of disagreements, lack of conflict resolution mechanism, and involvement of third parties in the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation, which intensified and expanded the conflict. Being close nations in geographic, economic, military, political, demographic, religious, historical, cultural, and other senses, the Russian and Ukrainian nations were also founding republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and have been the main pillars of the Soviet security structure. The circumstances of unity, common history, and mutual strategic irreplaceability underlined a combined effort by both states to mutually exclude any disagreement or sources of conflict. One manifestation of the close relationship between the Russian and Ukrainian nations was the decision of the USSR Supreme Soviet to transfer Crimea, which had been part of Russia since 1783, from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (February 19, 1954). The decision was made “to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the reunification of Ukraine with Russia” and to “evinced the boundless trust and love the Russian people feel toward the Ukrainian people” (Kramer, 2016).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of fifteen new republics, including Russia and Ukraine, created new possibilities and challenges, including those in the security domain, for each of those republics. While closely cooperating with Russia within the Commonwealth of Independent States - of which it was one of the founding members (together with Russia and Belarus (Malishev, 2019) - Ukraine rejected repeated offers by Russia to enter the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and to become part of a unified security complex together with Russia and a number of other post-Soviet republics.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine, along with many other former Soviet republics (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Uzbekistan) participated in a multitude of NATO programs, but none of those programs led to membership in that security organization. The relationship dynamics between Russia and Ukraine took a turn after the Ukrainian “Orange Revolution” that took place in November 2004 which—just as in the case of the Georgian “Rose Revolution” that took place a year earlier (2003)—rejected post-Soviet heritage (including non-democratic regimes) and attempted to move the country out of

Russia's sphere of influence and align Ukraine with Europe (Fairbanks, 2004). Active participants in Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" included pro-Western political opposition, NGOs, and nationalist forces (Lane, 2008), which, according to analyses, were under the influence of Western soft power (Nye, 1990), and, consequently opposed the prospects of maintaining on a future with Russia based on the two country's common past. This is why the Ukrainian revolution has also been compared to the 1968 anti-Soviet anti-socialist (anti-Russian) revolution in Prague ("Prague Spring" (Aslund, 2010)).

Since its independence, Ukrainian foreign policy geared towards expanding and intensifying cooperation with the European Union, including: Ukraine's participation in EU's Eastern Partnership initiative; signing the Association Agreement with EU; Ukraine's inclusion in the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area; the establishment of a visa-free regime between Ukraine and EU; and, because of the 2022 the war in Ukraine, Ukraine becoming an EU candidate member (Sologub, 2022). The Ukrainian leadership did not hide their pro-European sentiments or the steps they took to further integrate with Europe, but it was during the "Orange Revolution" that these sentiments took nationalist and anti-Russian overtones. These changes put Ukraine on a different path than Armenia in terms of their cooperation with the EU, with the latter trying to constantly balancing its relations between Russia and the West (Terzyan, 2019).

A further concern for Russia has been Ukraine's and Georgia's anti-Russian policies after the "Color Revolutions" as well as NATO's engorgement on Russia's borders by expanding to include new members in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In this time period, Russia and Ukraine reanimated some of their historical disputes. Some of these disagreements escalated, highlighted and promoted—sometimes artificially—to sow discord among both societies towards each other. On the one hand, Russian society and elites continued to consider Ukraine a country close and important to them, and considered Ukrainian and Russian nations to have common roots creating a need by Russia to block Ukraine from orienting towards Europe and consequently towards an anti-Russian path. On the other hand, anti-Russian sentiment in Ukraine was becoming the state rhetoric, a part of the social mentality. However, even with these escalating divides, Russia and Ukraine still shared a number of common issues including: Russian language (which was widespread in Ukraine and was on par with Ukrainian in terms of usage); the existence of a significant number of Russian-Ukrainian families through intermarriage; the Russian Black Sea Fleet stationed at the Crimean city of Sevastopol; the Russian fuel supply to Ukraine (at reduced rates); and the Russian fuel transit through Ukrainian territory to European countries. The Black Sea Fleet and its deployment in Crimea in particular had a historically important strategic significance for Russia, including the prevention of possible threats from Turkey (as a member of NATO) in the Black Sea. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, international land-rental agreements were signed between Russia and Ukraine to secure the deployment of the Russian fleet in the Black Sea. In 2010 these agreements were extended to last until 2042.

Meanwhile several issues started aggravating the Ukraine-Russia bilateral relations. Thus, the Ukrainian leadership periodically requested the reduction of

Russian gas prices sold to Ukraine, which was rejected by Russia on the grounds that the price of natural gas supplied to Ukraine was almost at the internal Russian market price. As a response, the Ukrainian political elite regularly called for the annulment of rental contracts and agreements on the deployment of Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea. Alternatively, there were calls for increasing the rent of land lease so high to make it impractical for Russia to pay the lease.

Moreover, after the “Orange Revolution” the pro-European aspirations of the Ukrainian society became less compatible with the policies of the pro-Russian President V. Yanukovich and the Party of Regions he led. The pro-European sentiments of the post-revolution Ukrainian opposition and its strengthening social basis contributed to another internal political crisis. One of the main reasons leading to mass protest in 2013 was the postponement of signing a cooperation agreement with the EU. Thus, for six years, Kiev had been negotiating an agreement to strengthen its political and economic cooperation with the EU which was set to be signed in November 2013 at the then-upcoming Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius. It was around that time that Russia proposed Ukraine join the Moscow-led Customs Union (later known as the Eurasian Economic Union), but Kiev rejected the offer. As a response Moscow put direct pressure on Yanukovich and forced the signing of the EU-Ukraine association agreement to be postponed.

A similar situation occurred with Armenia preceding the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit. Up until that point, an extensive and transparent process of preliminary bilateral negotiations around the process of Armenia’s association with EU was conducted, but on September 3, 2013, after a meeting with the Russian President in Moscow, Armenia’s President, Serzh Sargsyan announced that Armenia will instead join the Russian-led Customs Union. Consequently, the signing of the association agreement with the EU was postponed indefinitely leading to protests in front of the Russian Embassy in Yerevan.

Meanwhile, anti-Russian protests in Ukraine had reached a level of mass public demonstrations featuring thousands of people and turned into another “Velvet Revolution” (*Euromaidan*), as a result of which, on February 22, 2014, the *Verkhovna Rada* (parliament) of Ukraine recognized the administration of the pro-Russian President Yanukovich as illegitimate and announced snap presidential elections (Pishchikova, Ogryzko, 2014).

Kiev was leaving Russia’s traditional security sphere, turning from a territory of vital significance for Russia into a pro-Western state, with a possible anti-Russian leadership and a partially pro-Russian population. Ukraine was not only debating the Russian presence, cooperation with Russia, and their common history (Pikulicka-Wilczewska, Sakwa, 2016), but also the deployment of the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea, which had a major significance for Russian military interest.

To secure, at least partially, its strategic presence in a changing Ukraine, on March 16, 2014 and only a month after Euromaidan protests, a referendum was held in Crimea. The disputed referendum received military and political assistance from Russia and was supposed to address the desire of Crimea’s and Sevastopol’s population and the local pro-Russian authorities to become part of Russia. On March 21, 2014, the State Duma of Russia confirmed the decision on incorporating the Crimea Oblast and the city of Sevastopol into Russia. While the incorporation of Crimea into Russia was supported both in Russia and in Crimea (according to the

results of the referendum) and was being called “Crimea’s return home”, in Ukraine and Western countries there was a radically negative sentiment, calling what happened an annexation of Crimea by Russia.

The referendum and subsequent annexation of Crimea fueled similar sentiments in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblast (which both had sizeable ethnic Russian population) where the local administration and the population to become secede from Ukraine and become independent. These sentiments, which were supported by Moscow, escalated the confrontation between the authorities of these Oblasts and Kiev and further escalated the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

These events led to a systemic detachment of Russian-Ukrainian relations at political-institutional and public levels. Moreover, the confrontation between Russia and the international community over Crimea’s disputed annexation by Russia became the foundations to introduce sanctions against Russia, inadvertently leading to the geographic expansion of the conflict.

The severance of Russian-Ukrainian relations, the bilateral propaganda of an image of an enemy, territorial and human rights issues, the interests of global and regional states, and a number of various other systemic factors, as well as insufficient attempts at conflict resolution and the absence of necessary effort on both sides, contributed to the rapid escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

After the Crimean referendum, the escalating confrontation between Kiev and the local authorities of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, as well as Russia’s support to the population and authorities of these Oblasts led to Moscow recognizing the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics on February 21, 2022. The following day, the Federal Council of Russia allowed the deployment of Russian armed forces outside Russia’s territory, and on February 24, 2022, Russia started the war (official know in Russia as “Special Military Operation” (Kotoulas and Wolfgang Puszta (2022)).

Thus, the 2022 war in Ukraine was a consequence of an escalation of the previous stages of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This conflict is multidimensional and includes military, political, economic, demographic, informational, and cultural components. Not only does it have a prospect of a long-drawn war and to escalate further in the military and political senses, but it also has the potential to impact the region’s economic, energy, and demographic securities (Bowen, 2022).

Apart from the systemic factors, the Russian and Ukrainian presidents’ personal roles are also believed to be factors in the war in Ukraine. In the case of Russian President V. Putin, his imperial aspirations are mentioned, them being explained by Putin being a follower of the Russian foreign policy tradition (Marten, 2015). In that context the launch of the Ukrainian war by Putin is considered to be a result of erroneous calculations (Lebow, 2022).

Putin’s decision to transform the conflict with Ukraine into an all-out war could be explained by his concerns about NATO’s expansion into Russia’s vital sphere of influence. According to that point of view, the leaders of Western countries intentionally did not value Russia’s security concerns thus provoking Putin to resort to military action (Mearsheimer, 2022).

In the case of Ukrainian President V. Zelensky, it is his patriotic zeal (in his regularly uncourteous addresses to Western colleagues to equip Ukraine with weapons, financial-economic means, and other capabilities) or catering to the

interests of Western countries that are mentioned as contributing to the continuation of the conflict (Pisano, 2022).

Individual qualities of these countries' leaders as well as the societal qualities are often mentioned by (or on the) media and online platforms. Such discussions are often outside the professional or even factual scopes; they insult the dignity of both people and ethnicities and only escalate the hostility between the two states and nations.

It should be mentioned, that as a result of Western sanctions against Russia, a generally negative image of the Russian President and a generally positive image of the Ukrainian President have been widely spread by the international media. This has contributed to the further polarization of public opinion about the war in Ukraine even in societies which geographically or otherwise are not connected to the conflict.

To a large extent, public opinion in Armenia on the war in Ukraine reflects the perspectives of the global media, keeping in mind that these perspectives are conditioned by Armenia's internal and foreign policy agendas. Education, being the most westernized institution in Armenia, has led to the more formally educated young Armenians to be wary of the Russia's ambiguous policy. Armenia's youth, whose future is on the political agenda, cannot remain indifferent to the security challenges raised by the war in Ukraine. Unlike the older generation in Armenia that has the experience of being citizens (along with Russians) of the Soviet Union, the young generation's perceptions about the conflict and the war, stems mostly from situational or institutional foundations, rather than ideological or social ones.

RESEARCH DESCRIPTION

The research tried to address some issues via the focus group discussions, including:

1. Present the ideas of the youth about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict dynamics, including the direct and indirect parties in the conflict, its causes, and the interests of the participants involved.
2. Assess the youth's concerns regarding the probability of the expansion of the war in Ukraine.
3. Find out the opinion of the youth about the possible impact of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the war in Ukraine on the security of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and on the current state of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.
4. Discover the youth's opinions about the possible consequences of the war in Ukraine.

The focus group discussions were conducted via questionnaires. The discussion participants were initially informed about the purpose of the research, the objectives, the organizations implementing the research, the rights of the discussion participants, and the protecting the privacy of opinions and answers they provide to the questions. In this paper, the results of focus group discussions with young people residing in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, will be presented.

Six focus group discussions were conducted in Yerevan, with 45 participants in sum, including 24 women and 21 men of 18-35 years old.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Reasons of the Conflict

Among the reasons for the war in Ukraine, young people have mentioned Russia's actions (offensive, aggressive, preventive), as well as the West's (provocative, world-dividing) and Ukraine's politics (aimed at the unification with the European Union, treacherous from Russia's perspective). Particularly, the reasons mentioned for the conflict are:

- Russia's desire to show off its power and superpower status to the world (it's also an attempt to restore the Soviet Union)
- the war was Russia's reaction to the NATO-states' unified policy against Moscow (NATO provoked Russia)
- another process of world division is taking place, the territory of Ukraine being one of the targets of that division
- Ukraine attempted to get out of Russia's traditional influence and move towards the West, which Russia considered as a threat to itself and tried to prevent it.

“Ukraine is trying to develop and does not see Russia as a source of development, and is trying to get out from under it, and that is not in Russia's interest, that is why the war has started.”

Male, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

“European values or democracy were established in Ukraine; it was harmful to Russia and it could not control it.”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

The discussion in all groups demonstrated sufficient awareness, in-depth knowledge analytical skills, and approaches, of the youth. The following statement is an example of a thought that concisely expresses the opinion of many participants about the conflict dynamics:

“It started from Ukraine's orientation, which wasn't in Russia's interest as a superpower, and for that an excuse was needed to strike preemptively or use the guise of the rescuer, to save Lugansk and Donetsk. It was initially planned that Putin would occupy Ukraine, to bring the government to a pro-Russian, instead of a pro-Western orientation. But when that was unsuccessful, it went with its heroic, superman costume to free those two cities from the so-called “Nazi Ukrainians”. It seems to me that the main reason [for the war-Ed.] are the interests of the superpowers and the threats they perceive.”

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

During the discussions, one widespread opinion was that Russia acted preemptively to prevent further NATO's expansion. According to this perspective, Russia has tried to control Ukraine's foreign policy to prevent its rapprochement with the West, trying to prevent NATO from engorging on Russia's immediate border, and was met with retaliatory actions:

“They [NATO-Ed.] wanted to put Russia in the same situation as Iran is in –

economic blockade, sanctions, etc., and Ukraine was a good tool to turn these brotherly nations against each other and to weaken Russia. We see the consequences now, how they are arming Ukraine, but not including it in NATO so that they don't send troops to Ukraine. In fact, there is no Russia-Ukraine problem, it's mainly a Russia-West problem, which is the logical continuation of the Cold War."

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

"I think if this war had been avoided, the clash would have happened in a different place at a different time, it would have been inevitable. I look at this from the perspective of the Russia-USA conflict, I give very little importance and role to Ukraine."

Female 26-35 age group, Yerevan

The explanation of Russia's actions as being reactive, and responsive, also contained criticism, connected with the idea that it aimed at harming and causing losses to Ukraine as a very close nation to Russia. At the same time, it's noticeable that evaluating the situation from various perspectives, instead of just direct accusations against Russia, observations were also made about the provocative actions of other parties in the conflict, including Western states, along with systemic problems:

"Brzezinski's *The Grand Chessboard* (*the discussion participant refers to (Brzezinski, 2006), eds.*) tells that there is one superpower in the world, which is the US, and it decides the pace at which life goes on in the world. And now Russia has appeared, with ambitious Putin who, with his ideas and thoughts, has the history and the reality of the Soviet Union being a powerful state, and is trying to bring it back, so now that struggle is happening. Realizing it, the US will never let another power rise and take everything into its hands, and Russia is trying to counteract in every way. And in all of this, third world countries, ourselves and Ukraine, are suffering in that conflict. Russia and the US are fighting in Ukraine against each other."

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

Direct and indirect participants of the conflict

In all discussions, Russia and Ukraine, then Russia and the West (USA, NATO) were mentioned as direct participants in the conflict. In cases where Ukraine and Russia were mentioned as direct participants, the European Union, USA, and NATO from Ukraine's side, and individual CSTO countries (Belarus, Kazakhstan) from Russia's side, were mentioned as indirect participants or parties. Armenia wasn't mentioned in any discussions as a direct or indirect participant or party to the war in Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Republic of Armenia has its own interests, which define Armenia's reaction to the conflict (more on this below).

In cases, where Russia and the West were mentioned as direct parties to this conflict (in the context of a global conflict, including for the purpose of dividing Ukraine and Western presence in the Ukrainian territories), and USA, EU, United Kingdom, and

Israel were mentioned as active representatives on the Western side.

“I think that everything is being controlled by England and Israel. England is in charge, at the heart of everything is England with its plan. But I am in favor of Russia because Ukraine is a Slavic nation and there was no point in joining the West. What connection did the USA have with Ukraine? Russia has been on their side their whole life. And now the US is building a nuclear power plant in Ukraine, it’s building toxic laboratories. I’ve heard that Russia was angered because the nuclear power plants built in Ukraine by the USA were to be operational, and Russia was against it because if something happened, it would spread into its country as well. In fact, the leader of Ukraine is weak, just like in our country, he is like a puppet. See, the US provides weapons but doesn’t do anything certain. It’s like a show because if the US was really against this, this war would have been stopped long ago.”

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

Those participants of the discussions, who considered the war in Ukraine in a global context, as a manifestation of the superpower struggle, drew parallels between this conflict and other modern conflicts in the post-Soviet space (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh) and in the Middle East (Syria). From this perspective, Turkey was mentioned as an actively involved third party in the war in Ukraine, and, according to the participants, actively taking advantage of this conflict under the guide of a mediator:

“Currently, Turkey is one of the only Western countries that doesn’t use sanctions. On the contrary, it is developing good relations and the South Stream gas pipeline. Turkey is profiting, it transits the gas, which will ensure both its economic performance, as well as be a leverage on Europe. Like, look, the transit is ours, we will close it, if we want to, we will open it, if we want to. They can also increase the gas prices. It’s now presenting to be the state that can be the mediator to keep the connection between Russia and Ukraine.”

Male, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

China was also mentioned as a state with certain involvement in the global context of the war in Ukraine, guided by its own interests:

“It’s China, but China is supporting Russia because NATO is the second enemy for them.”

Male, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

The war in Ukraine has had direct and indirect impacts on the South Caucasus region. The three republics of which, according to the participants of the focus group discussions, have different interests in this conflict, and have diverging approaches towards it. Georgia, considers Russia as a threat, does not support it, and follows the West’s lead. However, according to young people, this hasn’t necessarily made Georgia pro-Ukrainian.

Azerbaijan, according to the participants of the discussion, has adopted a dual approach: on the one hand, it ostentatiously presents itself as closely cooperating with Russia, but on the other hand, indirectly supports Ukraine. That support is mutual: in 2020, during the Karabakh War, Ukraine supported Azerbaijan and

congratulated them afterward:

“Following the Azerbaijani press and news media, I can say that Azerbaijan is extremely anti-Russian. It has sent enormous amounts of medical aid to Ukraine and has expressed through statements that it stands by Ukraine. Lately, a number of Azerbaijanis have provided assistance to the Ukrainian army.”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

“Ukraine’s president, who officially congratulated Azerbaijan that they won, called them a brotherly state, etc. I don’t know how they can be a brotherly state. In this case, it would be shameful for us, if, knowing this, we expressed some kind of a positive attitude [towards Ukraine-Ed].”

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

Armenia’s position regarding the war in Ukraine is defined by several circumstances. On the one hand, according to young people, since Armenia is essentially dependent on Russia, a pro-Russian position should be expressed on this matter as well. Among the reasons for Armenia’s pro-Russian positions are the cooperation between Azerbaijan and Ukraine and Georgia’s anti-Russian stance, from which Armenia’s position, as Russia’s ally, should differ.

“Perhaps Armenia has expressed a more or less neutral position in our region, but it has more of a pro-Russian direction, because Georgia is exclusively pro-Ukrainian and it doesn’t hide its enmity with Russia, and well, Azerbaijan is arming Ukraine.”

Female, 26-35 group, Yerevan

“In fact, Russia’s influence is so great in our region, that no one will oppose Russia out of their own interests. For example, everything is connected with Russia.”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

On the other hand, Armenia is trying to not worsen its relations with the West, to balance out the influence of Russia and the West in the region, which is connected with Armenia being a cross-road, with scarce resources, a serious security threat, which force Yerevan to take an ambiguous position:

“Since the US has started to be interested in our region, we have also started to please the East and the West in some way, to sell a territory, in metaphorical sense. Geographically, we are a very bad but an important link, we are a link between the world and Iran, a tiny country between Turkey and Azerbaijan, which lies in the middle of the Great Turan and blocks it. And everyone understands it, not that Russia has set up a base here because they like us very much. It is for its Southern security. We should be able to “sell” our important geographic position to someone. Nobody in the world says they are in favor of someone, and that’s it.”

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

Thus, in the context of the war in Ukraine, Armenia’s position is not considered

unequivocally pro-Russian. At the same time, according to young people, it is more pro-Russian, than the position of other states, and is second only to Belarus. In addition, as mentioned, if Armenia's position on this matter is more pro-Russian than anti-Russian, then the attitude of the Armenia's society to this conflict is less pro-Russian than that of Armenia's authorities. Despite Ukraine's pro-Azerbaijan stance, Armenia also tries not to worsen relations with Ukraine:

“We should support Russia as a state, although as an individual I support Ukraine. These days only Russia does something [good-Ed.] for us.”
Male, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

During almost all discussions, the idea was expressed that during the war in Ukraine, together with the increase in the price of real estate and apartment rent in Armenia, the market and tourism became active, which was seen as a favorable factor for Armenia's economy:

“Russian citizens have come to Armenia more than Ukrainian citizens. They opened so many new organizations, they pay taxes, and they spend so much. I, as a hotel employee, see that the traffic has grown this year. Last year the hotel was on the verge of closing, and now that the war has started, until recently we have not had a day when there would be a free room. So much money comes in, and if the government uses it wisely, it can cover a very large part of the foreign debt.”
Male, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

The course of the war and possible developments

In all focus group discussions, the war in Ukraine was evaluated from the perspectives of the military-economic potential of Russia and Ukraine, the possibility of EU and NATO intervention, and the possibility of the Third World War. The views can be divided into four groups. The representatives of the first group discussed the issue of Russia's military actions, noting their duration, losses, and the low effectiveness of the Russian military not foreseen at the beginning, which, according to the young people, could be due to the overestimation of the capabilities of Russian armed forces, and the underestimation of the Ukrainian potential, the significant importance of the support provided to Ukraine by Western allies, as well as by the inadequate calculation by Russia's ruling elite of their own capabilities.

“A simple truth I know is that the strong are not being attacked. If you don't want war to happen, you must be so powerful and represent something out of yourself, so that others fear attacking you. Likewise, if it was possible to balance the Russian-Ukrainian war through negotiation, there would be no war if Ukraine had a very powerful army or was a very powerful state, and Russia was afraid of it. Apparently, the Russians did not expect such a counterattack. I am deeply convinced that Putin was given false information about the Ukrainian army and their readiness, and the Russians thought that they would enter in a couple of days, do their job, and this topic would be closed, while it has been going on for several months.”

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

The second set of opinions of the participants refers to the fact that the war was the personal error by Russian president Vladimir Putin, and if he prevented it on time or didn't start it, but used other possible means, the war could have been avoided.

“The conflict could have certainly been avoided, but only if there was a president with a different mindset instead of Putin. I mean, if that president was more democratic and didn't act like an aggressor.”

Male, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

The third group of opinions concerns the actions of the Ukrainian president Zelensky, which, according to the opinions of young people, together with the Western support ignited Russia's actions, and provoked them:

“On the one hand, Ukraine didn't act properly either, knowing that Russia has a bad relationship with the US, and elected a former comedian as prime minister, who lost control of the situation and did whatever he wanted. On the other hand, Russia is also to blame, because it openly created this situation, although the US also understood it well and used its resources in Ukraine, and Ukraine agreed to it. Ukraine was more to blame.”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

“In general, Russia also makes statements against NATO, and if Sweden and Finland enter the “borders” of the USA, so to speak, then these “borders” with Russia will increase, and the probability that there will be clashes is not small.”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

The fourth group of opinions concerns the inevitability of the war in Ukraine. According to this position, this is a part of a global conflict, a manifestation, and is connected with another division of the world into spheres of influence, the emergence of new forces in the international arena attempts to influence the weak states and competition amongst them.

“I think if this war has been avoided, the clash would have happened at a different place a few years later, it would have been inevitable. I look at this from the perspective of Russia-USA conflict, I still give very little importance to Ukraine. In my opinion, hadn't been Ukraine the point of the clash, it would have been a matter of years to decide where these forces would clash.”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

According to the young people, the probability of a Third World War is lower than the ongoing regional wars between Russia and the West in the “third world” (Ukraine, South Caucasus, and the Middle East).

Armenia's friends and enemies in the context of the war in Ukraine

In almost all group discussions, Yerevan-resident youth mentioned Armenia as having no friendly states and many enemies. Turkey, Azerbaijan, Israel, and Pakistan

were mentioned as enemy countries:

“Israel and Pakistan are among the enemies because they are supporting Turkey.”

Male, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

France and Iran were mentioned among the few friendly states, over which there were almost no disagreements. France is considered Armenia’s traditional friendly state, which, according to the opinion of the young people, actively supports Armenia today as well, including in the Karabakh conflict. These days, Iran has taken a more unequivocally anti-Turkish and anti-Azerbaijani position, which contributes to the protection of Armenia’s interests. The role of Western countries, including the USA, in regional issues derives exclusively from the interests of the USA, and the support expressed to Armenia is more of a lip-service. This is also how young people also explain the visit of the former speaker of the House of Representatives of the US Congress, Nancy Pelosi, to Armenia:

“At the moment, only Iran is a true ally, because it is only in Iran’s interest that Armenia does not become a part of Russia, and especially, of Turkey. On the other hand, I don’t equate our war with the Russia-Ukraine war, because if I look at it from Russia’s perspective, it is normal, because it’s like if Karabakh had a separate president now and was separated, but it’s still Armenia, and as if Karabakh now announced, saying, “Armenia, I don’t want to help you, I am now going to help the Turks.”

Female, 26-35 group, Armenia

“De jure we have allies, there are treaties, but de facto we don’t. I consider Nancy Pelosi’s visit [to Armenia-Ed.] as an act against Russia.”

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

In this sense, some of the participants, comparing Western countries’ and Russia’s role in Armenia’s security issues, prefer Russia:

“Why do I emphasize the role of Russia, not liking them that much? So many times during the war it became clear that there was no response to the calls of different countries: the US, France, etc., but just as Russia urged them [Azerbaijan-Ed.] not to shoot, it happened immediately.”

Male, 26-35 group, Yerevan

“If, for example, I had to choose between the US and Russia, I would definitely be in favor of Russia.”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

The role of Russia as Armenia’s ally is not certain in young people’s perceptions and is being strongly criticized. Despite the war in Ukraine being the main subject of the discussions, criticism of Russia was mainly due to the provision of improper support to Armenia, pursuing its own interests, and, in young people’s opinions, with the regular past and contemporary attempts at sacrificing Armenia. According to them, the relations with Russia can be called “forced relations”.

“Well, we should not forget that Russia is the largest supplier of everything to us, from food products and gas to other things. And it’s also our ally, at least

officially.”

Male, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

“For Russia, we are a Southern buffer, that’s the extent of their alliance, that’s why there is a base in Gyumri, etc.”

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

“I definitely consider Russia to be main enemy, because I have recently entered the university, studied Armenian history and all our defeats I only connect with Russia, we are just a toy in its hands. It’s obvious that our real enemies are Azerbaijan and Turkey.”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

While Russia-Armenia relations are mostly described as rather friendly, according to all discussions Armenia has no grounds for friendly relations with Ukraine. Ukraine was not a friendly state during the Karabakh conflict and especially during and after the 2020 war, including arming Azerbaijan and providing diplomatic and information support. This was mentioned during all group discussions:

“Ukraine was the first to congratulate Azerbaijan after our 44-day war.”

Male, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

“We should not forget that Ukraine was selling weapons to Azerbaijan, including phosphorus, which is banned for use during wars.”

Male, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

“4-5 years ago Ukraine was one of my favorite states, but I was disappointed when they helped Azerbaijan during the war. Well, they didn’t care about our war. And when their war started, in the beginning, they were indifferent towards us, then they thought that as now it’s happening to them, we have to sympathize. I was very disappointed by that.”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

Despite the sentiments mentioned above, young people do not want to use that as a foundation for anti-Ukrainian stance in the war in Ukraine. At the same time, they consider pro-Ukrainian slogans and certain attempts to support Ukraine in this war inappropriate:

“I have never seen a relationship between us [Armenia and Ukraine-Ed.], and it’s strange that we have become very Ukrainian-loving now. We have considered them the same Slavic nation. The change occurred after 2020 when it was said that Ukrainian phosphorus was used in the war, and our children died. Everyone said that Ukraine is protecting Azerbaijan, and one year later we suddenly forgot about the phosphorus, them helping Azerbaijan, and became peace-loving, kind teddy bears who think, “Oh no, the Ukrainian people are being massacred!”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

Changes in Armenia as a result of war in Ukraine

Young people participating in the discussions fear or express fears about a number of phenomena, including:

- Armenia's security situation, the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and other Armenian territories, and human casualties
- Armenia being divided by other states
- the threat of another war, but this time in the territory of Armenia
- uncertainty of the future
- possible influx of Turks
- losing the country
- emigration
- Third World War

"I'm afraid that this tiny piece [of Armenia-Ed.] too, which was saved somehow, half of it will go to the Russians, and the other half to the Turks. After the loss of Artsakh, I thought I shouldn't be afraid of anything else, but turns out it was not the end. We are falling so fast, that in the end, only a core will remain, a province called "Russian Province", as it was back in the time, Yerevan province."

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

"It frightens me that the role of Russia has significantly decreased in the region, and from the other side, Turkey's and Iran's appetites have increased. After the recent incidents, 140 hectares of our territory have been occupied, and Russia is not able to respond to it in any way. It's not the Russian-Turkish brotherhood, it's the fact that Russia is not in a good condition, and as a result, we are suffering, as its domain of influence."

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

The negative impact of war in Ukraine on Armenia's security was manifested in the Karabakh conflict, including in 2020, with Armenia's defeat in the Karabakh War and the emergence of further security problems. Russia's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine, and Moscow being sanctioned by Western countries, and then the military actions taking place in Ukraine did not allow Russia to provide proper support to Armenia.

"It seems to me that Azerbaijan took advantage of the situation, saw that Russia is busy taking away territories from Ukraine, so they didn't miss the moment and invaded our borders."

Male, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

"The more Russia is busy with Ukraine, the less it is involved in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, which gives Azerbaijan the opportunity to unleash further attacks. Azerbaijan says, get the Russian army out of Artsakh, it doesn't want Russia to be present here and is against Russia providing help to Armenia."

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

Armenia's security, interests, and necessary position in the conditions of war in Ukraine

One of the main subjects of the focus group discussions was Armenia's necessary position regarding war in Ukraine. According to young people, it is neutral.

“Our official position is that we are like-minded with Russia, but we also don't treat Ukraine that bad, we are neutral.”

Male, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

“Our official position is as neutral as possible. They show a bit that they are pro-Russian, but still are as neutral as possible.”

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

At the same time, Armenia shouldn't be wary of a possible Russia defeat, because that might strengthen the positions of other states in the region, including Turkey and Azerbaijan, with their anti-Armenian policies.

“How ready are we to have a neighbor like Turkey in the region without a strong Russia?”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

“Since the Russian troops are guarding our borders, it wouldn't be wise to go against it.”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

“In my opinion, Ukraine is more right in this conflict, but if Russia won't stand at our side, we will face bigger problems, that's why we must support Russia, as much as they are wrong.”

Male, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

Russia's defeat in its war in Ukraine, according to young people, could be situational, but a complete defeat is hard to predict.

“If Ukraine wins, it means that the US wins, and Russia's influence will weaken to some extent. But it's too powerful to go down, even if these sanctions are not affecting it. Even Europe is weakening itself to some extent by closing and moving out many businesses. But Russia is able to deal with it in such a way that they won't have a large-scale effect on it. No matter how much Russia weakens, its influence will remain in the region anyway.”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

“If Russia loses, in my opinion, its reputation as a serious superpower with a strong army will suffer in the world and in the region. It will lead to the appetite and the programmed aggression of Azerbaijan toward Armenia increasing because there will be nothing to restrain them. I think if Russia loses, we, Armenians, will have much harder consequences.”

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

According to young people's opinions, it's difficult to draw parallels between war in Ukraine and the Karabakh conflict. Some tried to see a similarity between

Armenia and Ukraine fighting in a war to defend their respective territories, some denied this similarity, because, in their opinion, no one supported Armenia during the 2020 war, while Ukraine is supported by all Western countries.

“If we look at it more simply, one side is fighting to keep its homeland (Ukraine), and the second side is fighting to occupy the other’s homeland. The same is in our case, we fight to keep our historical lands, our sovereignty, and Azerbaijan fights to occupy more lands or their imaginary lands.”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

In addition, the difference between the statuses of Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh was mentioned. If Ukraine is defending its territorial integrity, the people of Nagorno-Karabakh were defending their right to self-determination. In this sense, the unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh is more similar to the regions that want to leave Ukraine and join Russia.

“From the perspective of international law, Ukraine is a state with a separate government with its own borders, and Artsakh as a state with its borders is not internationally recognized. It’s just that it’s Armenia and there is an issue of self-determination, and it was different from Ukraine’s fight.”

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

Young people’s forecasts about the future

Various forecasts-ranging from pessimistic to optimistic - were made about the future in the focus group discussions. It can be observed that pessimistic forecasts are the majority and are defined by both regional political processes and Armenia’s internal political situation, while the optimistic ones were few and not always substantiated:

“Armenia will become a luxurious country, like Monaco. They will pass through Armenia from all over the world. Armenia will be a rich country.”

Male, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

“Armenia’s condition will become very good in a couple of years. Not that it’s bad now, but only if the war didn’t happen, it would have been better. At the moment Armenia has normal police, a stable economy, we have mines, water, and other capabilities, we have good roads, we have patrol.”

Male, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

Pessimistic forecasts refer first to the unresolved Karabakh conflict as well as to Azerbaijan and Turkey preparing military operations against Armenia; the escalation of conflicts in the region, and only then to the war in Ukraine. These are all manifested by the discussions of the young about their insecurity, fears, and uncertainty of their personal lives:

“You can’t be sure, that you are safe in your own country. You can’t be sure, that if you build a house, or buy a house, it will be there in a couple of days that another war won’t start. It’s a matter of seconds before Armenia could implode and cease to exist. It’s mainly connected with other countries. Armenia’s current government is not powerful, the general decisions about its future depend on other countries’ interests, it’s not sovereign.”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

“Honestly, I don’t see a future for Armenia, which is very painful to me. We wake up every day, watch the news, we see that someone was wounded, or killed, and it’s constant.”

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

Young people noted the situation caused by the consequences of the 2020 war, which is dangerous for the future of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. In this context, talks and plans to end blockades (by Azerbaijan and Turkey) instill more concerns than hope:

“I don’t see a good future. If they provide the corridor, we will become like Syria’s north, meaning there will be so many acts of terrorism, that people will voluntarily leave the area through which the road passes. But it’s the worst-case scenario.”

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

The pessimistic forecasts of young people towards the future are also related to the internal political situation of Armenia, including the restriction of rights and freedoms, internal political threats to democracy, and widespread hostility and hatred in the society, which, in their opinion could lead to defeats and losses on the foreign policy front:

“For me, Armenia is not a democratic country, it will never become one. Authoritarianism remains, and we might gradually turn become totalitarian, because more and more laws are passed and I don’t think such a thing happens in a democratic state. The insult [on insulting public figures-Ed.], for example. Or, another example, a number of structures attached to the Prime Minister’s Office are going to be created, such as the National Guard, which will be a power structure and will protect his individual, personal, and physical existence. In addition, the state system is slowly collapsing, and when they appoint every random person to be a chief of the general staff or don’t appoint one for half a year, or some historian becomes the Minister of Defense, or when a person unrelated to that field becomes the head of the field.”

Female, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

“It seems to me that if this government remains in power, our lands will decrease again in a year.”

Male, 18-25 age group, Yerevan

“If the majority of our nation votes for the same government again, it won’t achieve anything good.”

Female, 26-35 age group, Yerevan

CONCLUSIONS

The perception of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict by Armenia’s youth is conditioned by several factors, including:

- the perception of the warring sides in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the attitude towards those states
- political processes taking place in the region

- the process of the Karabakh conflict (including the consequences of the 2020 Karabakh War) which is currently relevant for Armenians and principally significant for the security dynamics of the region
- forecasts of the consequences of the influence of the war in Ukraine on the security of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The perceptions of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict by Armenia's youth can be split into two groups. In one group the conflict is geographic in nature; it is a manifestation of yet another historical stage of division of the world, a struggle between superpowers and alliances for spheres of influence. In particular, some post-Soviet countries (Ukraine and Armenia in particular) are in the modern stage of geographic transformation, as well as some countries of the Arab world (Syria in particular), while Russia, the West (NATO, EU, USA), Turkey, compete with each other to bring these countries into their spheres of influence. From this point of view, the war in Ukraine is a battlefield, a manifestation of the Russia-West conflict.

In the other group, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and war are explained by the personal qualities, aspirations, approaches, and issues of the leaders of Russia and Ukraine.

According to the generalized opinion of Armenia's youth, Armenia should remain as neutral as possible in its stance on the war in Ukraine, independently from its alliance obligations, the nature of the conflict, and its manifestations. At the same time young people's opinions on the immediate parties of the conflict—Russia, and Ukraine—are ambivalent and are determined by the positions of Moscow and Kiev in the 2020 Karabakh war. The current disappointment in Russia, Armenia's strategic partner is related to the defeat of the Armenian side in the war, while the negative attitude towards Ukraine is based on Ukraine's position in the Karabakh War, with military and diplomatic support towards Azerbaijan and Turkey. Again, according to the generalized opinion of Armenian youth, Armenia preserving its neutrality in the current situation is the most appropriate approach, independently from subjective and objective factors.

Opinions on the possible developments of the war in Ukraine, as well as general forecasts by Armenia's youth are mostly pessimistic. The new security threats that emerged after the 2020 Karabakh War and the events that followed it are hard to overcome, while the instability of the region and the possible globalization of the crisis can create unprecedented difficult conditions for Armenians. Looking for relatively stable side to adhere to, young people note the probable destabilization of Russia and the escalation of the conflict not just with Ukraine but with all countries of the expanding North Atlantic Alliance. At the same time sanctions directed at Russia hurt EU countries, which may push the relationship of Brussels with Armenia further down on the EU agenda. Apart from that, Armenia's youth is concerned with Turkey's and Azerbaijan's strengthening, which contributes to the prolongation of the war in Ukraine. Turkey and Azerbaijan, by playing both sides in the conflict, are able to reap benefits from both Russia and Ukraine, while at the same time achieving their strategical goals to rebuild a security system in the South Caucasus in their benefit.

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