

Introduction

I still remember it. Six years have passed, but I still remember it. It was a summer evening, less than two months before the re-eruption of the South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts and the Russian invasion of Georgia. It was not very dark, but the hot Georgian weather was cooling down as my train stopped in Sadakhlo, a town at the Georgian-Armenian border. Although it is located in southern Georgia, Sadakhlo is a predominantly Azeri town, ethnically. The area in which Sadakhlo is located is overwhelmingly populated by Azeris. To the west is another area that is predominantly populated by Armenians: Javakheti (called Javakhk by Armenians).

“Don’t worry. The train won’t go anywhere, unless I give the permission!” the railwayman told me in the Azeri language, instead of using Georgian, the language in which I had addressed him. A man in his mid-fifties, he had found willing ears and was very eager to tell me about his town of Sadakhlo, his life and ethnic relations in Georgia. While I found it very interesting, I did not want my curiosity to cause any delays in the long, rather uncomfortable, train journey. Armenian passengers were buying fruit from the local female Azeri vendors, calling them *sestra* [‘sister’ in Russian].

“Armenians are not bad. They are *vafadar*, *vafali* [faithful]. They are good friends,” the railway man said. “There are not many in Sadakhlo—only a few. But not far from here live Armenians in big numbers. They are a stubborn nation, for sure, but I have no bad experiences with them. Armenians are not bad.”

He continued: “I was born in Sadakhlo, my father was born here, my grandfather, my great grandfather [...]. Do you like my town?” It could indeed be this man’s personal opinion and experience, but I had also been told earlier by many others that there is no animosity between Armenians and Azeris in Georgia, that they cooperate together in business, and that their discontent is towards Georgians. Georgians see themselves as a tolerant people and they are proud of the cultural plurality of Georgia. Certainly, there are stereotypes in Georgia, and Georgians and Armenians can say very unkind things to each other, but it is unfair to say that they hate each other. Generally, minorities in Georgia dislike Georgians more than Georgians dislike minorities.

Attitudes towards the ‘Other’ in the republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia, Armenians and Azeris respectively, do indeed approach the *hatred zone*. Notably, Azeris talk aggrievedly about the ‘Other’. Nevertheless, one should not

generalize, and note that the Karabakh conflict has led to the vilification of the 'Other', and not vice versa. The Karabakh conflict is not caused by the perception of the 'Other' having a villainous character. In other words, hatred has followed the conflict, it did not cause it. The same Azeris were not shy about telling me about their pleasant Armenian neighbors in the Soviet past.

According to many Armenians, they are closer to Azeris culturally than they are to Georgians, despite both being Christians. Recently, Armenians have built up good business relations with Iranian Azeris, whose number in Armenia is rather significant. It is true that many Armenians despise Turks and, in general, Muslims. A central issue in conversations with Armenians is how Turks (and Kurds and, in general, Muslims) killed Armenians during the First World War. Not infrequently they accuse Azeris, being a Turkic speaking Muslim ethnic group, of hatred for Armenians. But there are also those who mention how many Armenians were saved by Turks and Kurds during the Armenian Genocide and that the Armenian diaspora in the Middle East lives peacefully with Muslims.

The reality is, however, that neither Armenians nor Azeris are keen to talk and hear about Karabakh in a balanced and rational way. My observation in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, for example, is that on the issue of land, you are either with them or against them. While the issue of 'Artskah [Karabakh] as an Armenian land' is not negotiable and is even untouchable for Armenians, their feelings toward their ethnic opponents—that is, Azeris—are not always ill-tempered. Indeed, it is common to hear about Armenian-Azeri friendships in Soviet times. "There are also many good people among the Azeris. I know. I have lived with them. They came to Armenia and we went to Azerbaijan," my taxi driver in Yerevan told me. Discussing Gorbachev and the legacy of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, he said: "Do you see? This stupid capitalism and democracy has changed everything. Before, it was nice, but look at it now. Now Yerevan is such a [...]. No wonder that no one wants to live here." He went on to tell me about the ethnic relations: "In every nation are good and bad people. These types are to be found among Azeris, Armenians, Turks—among every nation!" On the other hand, there were those who would show you a bad face if you asked them about the possibility of Armenian and Azeri coexistence in the future. Indeed, the Karabakh conflict was a very emotional issue in both republics. The Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict over Karabakh has been a brutal one that has cost many lives and has caused large numbers of refugees and displaced persons. Nevertheless, Armenians and Azeris coexisted peacefully in Georgia.

I have always wondered why there are enduring ethno-territorial conflicts in some multi-ethnic parts of Central Eurasia and not in others. What are the