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# Pathways to Conflict Transportation and Autonomisation: The Armenian Diaspora and the Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh

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**ABSTRACT**  Since its inception the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has generated multiple narratives in the region itself, in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and in the concerned diasporas. The war that occurred in 2020 engendered high levels of diasporic mobilisation, but interestingly the discourses of Armenian diaspora activists largely differed from those of Armenia or Nagorno-Karabakh. Drawing from theories of conflict transportation and autonomisation in diaspora settings, this contribution explores Armenian diaspora mobilisation in the USA, France and Russia, and argues that diverging narratives and positionalities in diasporic spaces, as compared to home countries, explain the (re)shaping of homeland conflict dynamics in diaspora settings.

## Introduction

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is one of the most brutal and prolonged conflicts of the post-Soviet era. It has territorial, ethnic and national dimensions intertwined with ancient grievances. Originating in the early twentieth century, the conflict took a more overt form in 1988, when Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh requested the transfer of the region from Soviet Azerbaijan to Soviet Armenia. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s, the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region declared independence and this paved the way for war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The war caused displacement and dispossession on both sides and when it ended in 1994, many issues remained unresolved. Since then, the conflict has alternated between phases of relative calm and outbursts of extreme violence, the most violent occurring in September 2020, when an all-out war broke out. Although the territorial claims are about a relatively small region in the Caucasus, the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute does not solely affect the relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey, Iran and Russia, as well as Western powers such as the USA and France have vested interests in the

region and they are involved in peace negotiations and other diplomatic efforts. In the recent war, Israel's influence was also more visible compared to the last decades (Bishku, 2021).

Since its inception, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has given birth to multiple and conflicting narratives, in the region itself, in Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also in the concerned diasporas. Each side has constructed collective memories over this dispute by clinging on to chosen traumas (Volkan, 2001) that helped to strengthen their nation-building processes. Each actor's conflict narratives present various and contradicting explanations for the territorial dispute, its origins, stakes, actors, and outcomes. Moreover, other actors such as Turkey and its diaspora got involved in transnational mobilisation at discursive and non-discursive levels (Baser, 2014; Baser & Féron, 2021). Since the 1990s, diaspora groups from both sides of the conflict have been involved in lobbying activities to change policymakers' opinions in their favour, especially in host countries such as the USA where both Armenian and Azerbaijani transnational communities constitute sizable diasporas. Even more interestingly, groups belonging to the same 'camp', such as the Armenian government, the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh government, and the Armenian diaspora, have tended to foreground diverging explanations for the conflict, and to propose different solutions to it.

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War revealed the actorness of Azerbaijani and Armenian diaspora communities as they have been extensively active and visible with regards to transporting the conflict outside the boundaries of the conflict zone and promoting their side of the story to their host societies and beyond. This diaspora mobilisation did not take place in every host country where diasporas reside, and the intensity of the campaigns varied from country to country. While in some cases, violent encounters between adversary diaspora groups were common, in others social media served as the main battlefront for diaspora activists. Interestingly, the transportation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict among Armenian, Turkish, and Azerbaijani diasporas settled all around the world is often characterised by references to issues that are only tenuously related to what is actually happening in Nagorno-Karabakh, such as the Armenian genocide. Why were these issues intertwined in the minds of the Armenian diaspora activists?

Over the past two decades, a growing number of studies have started exploring how diaspora[1] groups 'import' or 'transport' conflicts happening in their home countries, to the countries where they reside (Baser, 2015; Féron, 2013; Skrbiš, 1999). These studies have shown that events occurring in home countries could trigger the mobilisation of diasporas, sometimes decades or even generations after migration (Demmers, 2002; Féron & Voytiv, 2021) thanks to intergenerational transmission of cultural trauma (Toivanen & Baser, 2019). This literature has highlighted different factors affecting conflict transportation and has shown that transported conflicts are almost never pure reproductions of conflicts back home. In many cases, diasporas reappropriate and reinterpret home conflicts from their own specific perspective, leading to conflict autonomisation in diaspora settings (Féron, 2017). Moreover, scholars have underlined that diaspora do not constitute monolithic groups. Even within a diaspora community there can be various segments divided along ideological, ethnic, cultural or even personal lines (Böcü & Baser, 2022).

So far, studies of conflict transportation and autonomisation have tended to focus on divisions and tensions existing between diaspora groups and have not much studied potential tensions between diaspora groups and their home countries. Therefore, in this contribution, we are interested in understanding how homeland conflict dynamics are (re)created and (re)shaped in diaspora settings, and what role tensions and divisions between diaspora

groups and home country actors play in these reconfigurations. Drawing from theoretical understandings of conflict transportation and autonomisation in diaspora settings and building on the existing literature we want to understand how diverging narratives and positionalities in diasporic spaces, as compared to countries of origin, can further explain patterns of conflict transportation and autonomisation.

While trying to comprehend how the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict dynamics are transported to diaspora settings, we also focus on the interactions between the Armenian government, the *de facto* government of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Armenian diaspora settled in France, Russia and the USA. These countries host some of the largest and most mobilised Armenian diasporas, and each played a significant role in third party mediation efforts in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group. We argue that divergent approaches within one 'side' of a conflict, as well as the local political contexts in which diaspora groups reside, matter vastly for understanding when and how conflict transportation and autonomisation happen. Our data includes a variety of sources: (1) observation and 12 interviews conducted since 2016 with participants in events organised by the Armenian diaspora in France and the USA and, to a lesser extent, in Russia; (2) 13 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2016 and 2022 with officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, with representatives of the *de facto* government in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as with Armenian civil society organisations liaising with the diaspora. These interviews focused on the relations between Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Armenian diaspora; (3) documents compiled from the relevant diaspora organisations' websites, as well as from social media, which constitutes a major space for mobilisation and activism, especially among diasporic youth (Chernobrov, 2022; Chernobrov & Wilmers, 2020). Our analysis captures the diasporic activities until summer 2022, when new violent clashes occurred between warring parties.

## Conflict Deterritorialisation and Transportation in Diasporic Spaces

Diasporas are the rising non-state actors in international relations. During the last decades, scholars have underlined the ascending role that these groups play in peacebuilding and conflict transformation thanks to their ties to both home and host countries and their hybrid transnational identities which enable them to be credible actors on both sides. While some studies focused on how diasporas get mobilised for homeland political affairs (Mavroudi, 2018), others zeroed in on how they get involved in lobbying host states (Shain, 2002), development projects in home states (Mishra, 2016), conflict resolution (Pande, 2017), transitional justice (Haider, 2014) as well as conflict perpetuation (Roth, 2015). These studies, focusing on an array of case studies (mostly from the Global South) demonstrate that diasporas do not leave the homeland conflicts behind as a result of displacement. Generational transmission of collective memory, especially pertaining to cultural trauma, generates continuation of dedication to different matters related to the homeland. These mobilisation patterns create different spheres of diaspora engagement, and the mobilisation's scope depends on various factors including the diaspora's profile and size, political opportunity structures in countries of residence, as well as diaspora engagement policies implemented by countries of origin (Orjuela, 2018; Skrbiš, 1999). While volumes of work have explored diaspora activism, a few scholars specifically tried to understand how homeland conflicts are (re)created among different adversary groups in the transnational space (Baser, 2015; Féron, 2013; Pupcenoks, 2015), and

how conflict dynamics are transmitted to countries of residence via migration flows. As detailed in the introduction of this collection, the literature on diasporas and conflicts has now well established that several factors contribute to conflict transportation, and that conflict transportation is often visible at the discursive, societal and physical levels (Féron, 2013, 2017).

During this process of conflict transportation, each conflict-generated diaspora group creates its own narrative, and in many cases 'chosen traumas', as coined by Volkan (2001), become the epicentre of collective identity. As conflicts go on, new traumas are added, and collective memory is shaped and reshaped as a result of contemporary developments; however 'chosen traumas' remain at the narratives' core and maintain the collective identity of various communities for generations. The term refers to the 'shared mental representation of a massive trauma' (Volkan, 2001) experienced by the groups' ancestors which can be transmitted to future generations and turn into a transgenerational trauma (Der Sarkissian & Sharkey, 2021). For Graf (2018), such retention of past traumas enables certain communities to complete their boundary-drawing process vis-à-vis other community(ies) and becomes a significant marker of group identity and sense of belonging.

Conflict transportation is also facilitated by communication technologies and globalisation enabling diasporas to stay in touch with their homelands and strengthen ties. As Ponzanesi (2020) explains, 'the old notion of diaspora which accounts for the interruption of the unity between territory, nationhood and state is now remediated through new forms of 'diasporic digitality' that allow people to keep in touch with the homeland but also establish new connections across diasporas through multiple affiliations and intersections provided by crossmedia platforms.' Diasporas, therefore, create new spaces for already existing and new debates by creating transnational cyber civil societies (Bernal, 2004). Each political, social, economic development in the homeland reaches diaspora members via social media and other means, within seconds. Moreover, these communication technologies enable further transnationalisation and not only link diasporas to their homelands and to their kin globally, but more importantly to other groups that might be perceived as adversary. Therefore, diasporas often engage in virtual wars by spatialising the cyber space for nationalist and other exclusionary practices, which accelerate the deterritorialisation of homeland conflicts (Bernal, 2001).

Diaspora groups have also started imitating social movements and using certain repertoires of actions to mobilise resources. Diaspora entrepreneurs lead initiatives to influence host country politics, mobilise future generations and sustain connections with homeland political affairs. As diaspora-homeland nexus is sustained, political developments in the homeland affect not only diaspora members' sense of belonging and mobilisation patterns, but also their relationships vis-à-vis other diaspora groups in the same country of residence as a result of conflicts in the homeland. Kurdish and Turkish violent and non-violent encounters in various European countries such as Germany, France and Sweden are a testimony to that (Baser, 2015). Tensions are transported from the homeland to countries of residence despite the spatial and sometimes temporal distance, but does it always happen exactly in the same way?

Literature on diasporas and conflicts has shown that transported conflicts are rarely simple reproductions or continuations of conflicts 'back home'; they often centre around different issues, take different shapes and involve different actors. So far this process, which has been called autonomisation of conflicts in diasporic settings, has been explained

mostly by the context and opportunity structures in countries of residence, and/or by the characteristics of the concerned diaspora group itself (Baser, 2015; Féron, 2013, 2017). Less attention has been paid to other factors, relating for instance to diaspora engagement policies implemented by home countries, or to relations between and within diaspora groups. We aim at filling in this gap by focusing on the Armenian diaspora and examining how the recent conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is framed by different actors who are usually considered on the same side. We demonstrate that conflict transportation creates autonomised dynamics in host countries not only between adversary groups but also within groups that are supposedly representing the same cause. We argue that diasporas' positionality and self-interests also have an impact on how homeland conflicts are framed, presented and represented in a transnational context.

## Repertoires of Conflict Transportation and Autonomisation: The Armenian Diaspora and the Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh

In this section, we explore the main narratives developed by the Armenian diaspora in the USA, Russia and France vis-à-vis the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. We show that in spite of the fact that Turkey is not an immediate party to the conflict, it is in most cases treated as such by the Armenian diaspora. Similarly, Armenian actors tend to see Azerbaijan as a satellite Turkish state which is tied to Turkey. In political and social discussions, Azerbaijani agency is often reduced, and Armenian actors treat Turkey as the main opponent and interlocutor. In all these narratives, and although it does not bear a direct connection to the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian genocide acts like a compass. As mentioned previously, Volkan's concept of chosen trauma is an explanatory factor in this case (Baser & Swain, 2008, p. 51).

At an estimated number of around 5 million people with Armenian ancestry living outside of Armenia, the Armenian diaspora is very large and diverse (Ter-Matevosyan et al., 2016). As an amalgam of different layers of migration (Bolsajian, 2018, p. 29), the Armenian diaspora(s) around the world display different characteristics and mobilisation patterns, as well as different political preferences and attitudes, including vis-à-vis the Armenian government. For instance, some ultra-nationalist diaspora sections are openly hostile to the current Armenian government, while others tend to support it or remain neutral. However, the recognition of the Armenian genocide and counteracting against Turkey's denial is a priority for all Armenian diasporas across the globe (Gül Kaya, 2018). Other causes have been added to the diaspora's primary agenda, such as Nagorno-Karabakh's independence from the Republic of Azerbaijan, or supporting Armenia's cause in the Caucasus region and the world (Baser & Swain, 2008). However, mobilisation towards peace, conflict and development in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh itself is always translated through the lens of the experience of cultural trauma and genocide. Past atrocities, in other words, determine the present for many diasporans, for whom commemoration and activism lie at the heart of diasporic unity. Therefore, across countries most relevant to the peace process in Nagorno-Karabakh (the so-called Minsk group countries: the USA, France and Russia), diasporic mobilisation has been relatively high during the 2020 war. However, as we further explore below, diasporic mobilisation follows clearly distinctive patterns in each of these countries, as it is influenced both by specific migration histories and temporalities, and by distinct political contexts.

*Armenian Diaspora Activism: History as a Reading Grid for Contemporary Events*

Around 1.5 millions people with Armenian heritage currently live in the USA, and around 100.000 Armenians migrated there right after the 1915 Ottoman deportations and the genocide (Bolsajian, 2018, p. 30). The diaspora is mostly settled in California and the North East. During the 2020 war, it organised both street demonstrations and high profile lobbying political actions, notably through organisations such as the Armenian Assembly of America (AAA) or the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) which advocate for boycott against Azerbaijan. As we will see, most of these activities have however not focused primarily on Nagorno-Karabakh but rather on the recognition of the Armenian genocide.

The largest Armenian diaspora (est. 300-600.000) in Western Europe resides in France, where it has maintained a constant presence since the fifteenth century. Up to 90,000 Armenians fleeing the 1915 genocide settled in France, mostly in the South. Nowadays, among the most active diaspora sections figure organisations such as the Armenian National Committee in France (CDCA), the Forum des Associations Arméniennes de France or the Conseil de coordination des organisations arméniennes de France (CCAF), that are mostly focused on genocide recognition. The Armenian diaspora is influential in French politics, through parliamentarian groups such as the Groupe d'Amitié France-Arménie active in both the National Assembly and the Senate, but above all because in the eyes of the French catholic right the situation in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh symbolises the need to protect Christianity from Islam.[2] With regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, diaspora associations notably organised humanitarian and awareness-raising activities like demonstrations in front of the Azerbaijan Embassy in Paris when the situation escalated, notably in 2016 and 2020.

The world's largest Armenian diaspora resides in Russia (est. 1.7-2.5 million). It is older and arguably more diverse than the Armenian diaspora groups in France and the USA (Galkina, 2006). However, it is only recently that it began to organise, as the concept of diaspora did not exist during Soviet times: Armenians living for instance in Moscow did not have the feeling of being 'abroad'. Despite initiatives to unite and mobilise the diaspora, for instance through the Union of Armenians of Russia (SAR), mobilisation has been hampered by competition between organisations. In fact, it is the Armenian Apostolic Church that plays the most important role in maintaining the cultural identity of Armenians living in Russia (Ter-Matevosyan et al., 2016).

Across these very different contexts, narratives regarding Nagorno-Karabakh are characterised by a common stress put on history as a reading grid for contemporary events. In particular, the Armenian diaspora's framing of recent events through the prism of the 1915 genocide, and its tendency—at least in France and the USA—to treat the Azeri-Turkish block as a monolithic threat towards Armenian existence, show how much previous episodes of violence shape the perception and understanding of current events. For the Armenian diaspora, the genocide is the 'chosen trauma' (Volkan, 2001). It is central as an identity element, as a claim, but also as a structuring historical event, since the genocide largely explains the existence and the size of the diaspora, at least in France and the USA (Panossian, 2002). Commenting on the Armenian diaspora in the USA, Dennis Papazian (2005, p. 324) remarks that 'it is the Genocide which is the common denominator that marks the community's present identification. (…) As Armenians in America realise, a present-day genocide in Karabakh or Armenia would spell the end of the Armenian people after 3,000 years of self-preservation'.

The use of the 1915 genocide as both a reading grid and a source of mobilisation is apparent in all three studied contexts. In France for instance, the CCAF issued a statement in September 2020 in which it accused Turkey to be responsible, together with Azerbaijan, 'of this invasion attempt that inscribes itself in the frame of its genocidal politics and of its Ottomanist aims in the region' (CCAF, 2020a). A few weeks later, commenting on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, the CCAF added: 'these crimes are in line with the 1915 genocide. They stem from the same ideology and pursue the same ends' (CCAF, 2020b). As explained by a French-Armenian diaspora activist, 'for us it is impossible to look at the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh today and not to think about the genocide' (interview, 4 October 2020). Similarly in the USA, in a letter sent to the Ambassador of Israel regarding weapons sent to Azerbaijan, the ANCA Chairman asked him to 'ensure that Israel will never be complicit in a second Armenian Genocide' (ANCA, 2020a). Signs bearing the words 'Stop the second Armenian genocide' were on display during demonstrations organised in October 2020 in various US towns, such as in Boston (Martin, 2020).

The 1915 genocide is not just invoked by Armenian diaspora organisations and during street demonstrations, it is also mentioned as a major motivating factor for individuals who decided to go to Nagorno-Karabakh in order to participate in its defence during the 2020 war: a Russian Armenian for instance said 'we all understand that Armenia and Artsakh are on the verge of extinction' (Kim, 2020), while another Russian Armenian explained: 'I want to join the final battle for our homeland' (Sauer, 2020), thereby echoing the words of an American Armenian: 'If the perpetrators of genocide are back we have to go back to the battle field, we don't have a choice' (Safi & McKernan, 2020). These quotes demonstrate that the 1915 genocide plays the role of a collective trauma, and that both the genocide and the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh evoke feelings of injustice and a struggle for recognition. As there is no closure for the 1915 genocide, since those who have inherited the political legacy of genocide perpetuation do not acknowledge the harm, each new issue arising among the involved parties creates intertwined discourses—its extent depending on the actor and the context. As a result, the genocide is linked to the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, as both 'share the same symbolic adversary' (Chernobrov & Wilmers, 2020, p. 921).

It is therefore not surprising to see that although Azerbaijan is the main actor faced by Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian diaspora primarily holds Turkey responsible, especially in France and the USA. This can notably be explained by the fact that a large part of US- and French-Armenian diaspora groups were formed as a result of the 1915 genocide. Thus, slogans heard during demonstrations held during the 2020 war mostly targeted Turkey and Erdogan, and to a lesser extent Aliyev, rather than Azerbaijan in general. Slogans and narratives also tended to lump together Turkey and Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan being seen for the most part as Turkey's lackey: for instance in Paris demonstrators chanted 'Recep Erdogan, terrorist' (AFP, 2020), and in Boston protestors held 'Turkish Hitler' signs comparing Hitler to Erdogan or asserting that 'Turkey supports terrorism' (Martin, 2020). For members of Armenian diaspora organisations, 'it is obvious that Turkey has a hand in current events' (American-Armenian diaspora activist, online interview, 22 October 2020). In France and the USA, then, the transported conflict is not an exact reflection of the on-the-ground situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, where the main adversary is the Azerbaijani army. Instead, it primarily echoes the historical dynamics of Armenian-Turkish relations.

However, the situation is different in Russia, where narratives among Russian-Armenians seem more restrained, and put more stress on the need to support the population in Nagorno-Karabakh, and to stop the war: 'Artsakh, hold on! We are together! The first batch of humanitarian aid from the Union of Armenians of Russia is on its way. Everything that is necessary for the civilian population, the elderly, for women and children who are forced to stay in bomb shelters, is being sent to Stepanakert' (quoted by Sakhnin, 2020). The need to preserve peaceful relations with the Russian-Azerbaijani diaspora seems to play a major role in these discourses, with frequent references to good relations enjoyed during Soviet times. On 1 October 2020 for instance, the leaders of the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities in Russia issued a joint statement: 'Addressing our compatriots, we strongly ask them to remain calm, show respect for each other and not give in to provocations. It is necessary to carefully assess the situation, respect and comply with the laws of our country, and preserve interethnic harmony'.[3] The fact that the Armenian diaspora in Russia was formed by successive waves of migration, several predating the 1915 genocide, and the latest caused by the first Nagorno-Karabakh war, also explains that Aliyev's regime is more likely to be identified by Russian-Armenians as the 'enemy' than Turkey.

On the whole, we can observe that the discursive transportation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in diaspora settings builds upon specific narratives that do not reflect the exact situation in the region. These transported conflict narratives seem to be the product of specific dynamics and power relations, notably relating to the weight given to some issues, like the genocide, that are at least partly disconnected from the conflict dynamics 'at home'. Shifting the focus from narratives to different types of political mobilisation, in the next sections we examine how the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has been transported in diaspora settings through lobbying, competition for influence, but also violent clashes.

## Lobbying and Competition for Influence

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been a hot topic in diasporic spaces since the 1990s, and significant processes of conflict transportation have occurred at the diplomatic, political and policy levels. Especially in the USA, where the Armenian diaspora has the most leverage and impact, congress halls and lobbying quarters turned into a second battle front in the discursive sense. As has already been well shown, the structure of the US political system creates multiple opportunities for diaspora lobbying, in particular in the field of foreign policy (DeWind & Segura, 2014). This is particularly the case of the Armenian diaspora, although it has not always been successful, for instance with regards to US energy policy towards Turkey and Azerbaijan (Zarifian, 2014). On the whole however, the lobbying activities of the US-Armenians have made a big impact on the Congress and influenced US policymakers towards pro-Armenian decisions regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. Organisations such as the AAA or ANCA have notably spearheaded multiple actions, for instance regarding the Section 907a of the 1992 Freedom Support act that denies all aid to Azerbaijan or condemning Azerbaijan's attacks on Nagorno-Karabakh (AAA, 2020).

Less open to substate groups' lobbying (Montague, 2013), France nevertheless has a large Armenian diaspora whose political influence is exercised by several groups, such as the previously mentioned Groupe d'Amitié France-Arménie, or the Cercle d'Amitié France-Artsakh.[4] Among other activities, these groups have promoted a law proposition

on the recognition of Artsakh which was passed by the French Senate (Bourdillon, 2020), obtained the support[5] of the Région Île de France, France's largest and most populated region, as well as of 176 elected officials (JDD, 2020). The few politicians who speak in favour of Azerbaijan face fierce backlash, as well as insults and threats on the part of the Armenian diaspora and its supports (Charente Libre, 2020). Foregrounding Armenia's identity as a Christian nation, diaspora organisations have also capitalised on debates on the influence of Islam in France in order to gain influence and sympathy not only at the political level, but also among the wider public (Levin, 2020).

While political lobbying is even less openly practiced in the Russian Federation (Williams, 2010), it is not absent and materialises notably in the influence of oligarchs of Armenian origin, millionaires and billionaires such as Danil Khachaturov, Ruben Vardanyan, or Ara Abrahamyan (Cavoukian, 2013, p. 714). Interestingly, the largest Russian-Armenian diaspora organisation, the Union of Armenians in Russia (SAR), is chaired by Ara Abrahamyan himself. Because of the structure of the Russian political system, diaspora organisations' lobbying activities have adopted a less openly political undertone than in the USA and France, in favour of humanitarian- and development-oriented discourses. For instance, the SAR established a fund 'Aid for Artsakh' collecting donations for Nagorno-Karabakh during the 2020 war but refrained from openly calling for volunteers to join the fight, probably under pressure from the Federal Security Service (FSB) (Sakhnin, 2020).

Conflict transportation in diasporic spaces has thus translated into various lobbying activities, which however took different shapes depending on the host country's political opportunity structures. One interesting characteristic of the lobbying activities conducted by the Armenian diaspora in the USA, France and Russia is that they are largely taking place without input or direct intervention from either the Armenian government, or the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh authorities (Official representative 4 of the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview, 28 July 2022; and official representative 2 of the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview, 2 December 2016). This allows the Armenian diaspora to develop its own narratives in a largely independent manner, thereby further entrenching conflict autonomisation patterns.

### Violent Clashes and Diasporic Armenians Joining the Fight in Nagorno-Karabakh

It is however on the streets that conflict transportation became the most visible. Autumn 2020 saw the multiplication of violent clashes between members of the Armenian, Turkish, and Azerbaijani diasporas in various countries around the world. In the French city of Lyon for instance, members of the Turkish and Azerbaijani diasporas marched towards Armenian neighbourhoods, chanting slogans of 'Allahu Ekber' (God is Great) and asking each other: 'Where are the Armenians' (Skopeliti, 2020). In parallel, Armenian protestors blocked highways in the South-East of France, generating fighting with Turkish diasporans. In Boston (USA) where a sizeable Armenian community resides, Armenian demonstrations were interrupted by Azeri diaspora members (Arkun, 2020). Clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani diaspora members occurred in Brentwood too. Violence also escalated in Moscow between Armenians and Azerbaijani in the months preceding as well as during the 2020 war, with both diasporas' members attacking each other's shops and restaurants, groups of men beating drivers and damaging cars with Armenian license plates, and several people stabbed and wounded (AP, 2020).

The Armenian diaspora' participation in violence also materialised in people volunteering for joining the fight in Nagorno-Karabakh. In September 2020 for instance, the SAR compiled a list of 20,000 Russian-Armenians who wanted to fight alongside Armenian forces. Similar patterns have been observed in France and the USA, among other places.

One interesting characteristic of the violence that erupted between diasporas in 2020 is that it followed different patterns in the three observed countries. In France, physical clashes occurred between Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Turks in the diaspora and not just between Armenians and Azerbaijanis like in the USA or Russia. The relatively smaller size of the Azerbaijani diaspora in France, as compared to Armenian/Turkish ones, partly explains this trend. But another explanation lies in the centrality of the genocide and therefore, of Turkey, in the French-Armenians' narratives. Here, Turkey is lumped together with Azerbaijan because the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is interpreted as another genocidal episode. Reinforcing this trend is the fact that the Azerbaijani and Turkish diasporas settled in France have been mobilising for decades to counter Armenian narratives both about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as about the 1915 genocide recognition (Horizon, 2022). By contrast, and despite the fact that a sizeable Turkish diaspora resides in the USA, the altercations that occurred in the USA remained between Azerbaijani and Armenian diaspora groups. One reason could be that the profiles of the Turkish migrants in the USA are different than in Europe due to migration trajectories. The USA mostly received migration from Turkey's secular and highly educated segments, while the Turkish diaspora in Europe includes large communities which are loyal to the current regime in Turkey with conservative and nationalist tendencies. Finally, in Russia, the Turkish diaspora is relatively smaller as compared to other Turkish diaspora communities. Also, due to historical legacies, Azerbaijani and Armenian communities have a more visible and active mobilisation in Russia.

All in all, we can see that conflict transportation patterns are significantly influenced by political opportunity structures in countries where Armenian diaspora groups reside. In the next and final section, we take a step further and explore how relations between the Armenian diaspora, the Armenian government and the *de facto* authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh play an important role for explaining how the conflict is autonomised in diasporic settings.

## Tensions between Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and the Diaspora as Factors of Conflict Autonomisation

Research has well established that home countries play an important role in fuelling conflict transportation processes, and that their diaspora engagement policies partly explain why and how conflicts are transported in the diaspora. During the 2020 war for instance, the urgency of the situation pushed Armenian officials to repeatedly call for a direct political and material involvement of the diaspora. At the end of September 2020, the Armenian Diaspora High Commissioner's Office (also called Ministry of Diaspora) issued a thinly veiled call to arms to the diaspora: 'In this war we are all soldiers and all have an important role to play. The time has come for each of us to stand ready to do our part, each within our means, to defend our nation and our land'.[6] Multiple Armenian governmental institutions dealing with diaspora affairs also called for donations (Diaspora High Commissioner Office, 2020). Similarly, during the 2020 war the president of the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh state Arayik Harutyunyan called for the diaspora's participation in this 'sacred, patriotic war' (Kocharyan, 2020).

Such calls are, however, not representative of the relations Armenia usually maintains with its diaspora. Aside from periods of acute conflict escalation, both the Armenian government and the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh government expect the Armenian diaspora to play the role of a development and peacebuilding actor (official representative 2 of the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview, 2 December 2016), rather than that of a political ally. Contrary to what happens, for instance, in the case of Rwanda (Turner, 2013), Armenia does not usually try to harness its diaspora for political purposes. Admittedly, the Armenian government regularly asks for the diaspora's political support in its host countries, but it is mostly 'for supporting the government resolutions' proposals at the international level', not for influencing their design (official representative 1 of the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview, 1 December 2016).

In fact, the Armenian diaspora rarely plays the role of soundboard for Armenia's policies and politics. This is because the Armenian diaspora is itself heavily divided, depending on where it is settled, but also within each host country: in France and the USA especially, those who are willing, if reluctantly, to support the Armenian government in their decisions regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, are firmly opposed to those who accuse the Armenian government of inefficiency and too much leniency towards Azerbaijan and Turkey (French-Armenian diaspora activist, interview, 5 October 2020). Among the latter, who are arguably the most vocal, many share the feeling that the 2017 constitutional reform strengthening the role of the prime minister and reducing the power of the president, as well as the 2018 Armenian 'Velvet Revolution', have insufficiently addressed issues related to corruption and oligarchy within Armenian governmental circles (American-Armenian diaspora activist, online interview, 23 October 2020). These negative perceptions seem particularly pregnant among youth active on social media (Chernobrov & Wilmers, 2020, p. 927), who often voice diverging opinions, or doubt official interpretations of events. In Russia, relations between the diaspora and the Armenian government have historically been a bit easier, which some authors have explained by a common 'Soviet mentality' (Cavoukian, 2013), but have nevertheless been tense especially since the 2020 war (Russian-Armenian diaspora activist, interview, 27 July 2022).

Besides condemning corruption and oligarchy within the Armenian government, and opposing any compromise with Azerbaijan, the most nationalist sections of the Armenian diaspora interpret any new governmental decision as a potential betrayal of the memory of the genocide. This pertains in particular to normalising the relations between Armenia and Turkey, which is viewed by Armenian diplomats as a necessary evil, separate from the Nagorno-Karabakh issue (mid-career diplomat, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview, 27 July 2022). The diaspora's hostility to such a move has long fed the opinion that it is too radical to be a reliable political partner: 'Diaspora's attitudes are often more radical and sharper, mostly because it does not feel the direct effects of tensions, conflicts and embargoes. It was very clear when we were in the discussions with Turkey regarding the end of embargo' (official representative 2 of the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview, 2 December 2016). In addition, the Armenian government seems to consider the most nationalist elements within the diaspora as objective allies of the nationalist opposition within Armenia, although their cojoined political weight is thought to be rather weak (high level diplomat, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, informal discussion, 26 July 2022). So while many Armenian diplomats seem to regret their inability to rely on the diaspora's soft power at the international level (informal group discussion, Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 28 July 2022), its perceived radicalism has led

the Armenian government to oppose its direct involvement in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (official representative 1 of the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview, 1 December 2016). In practical terms, this mistrust has translated into diverging narratives and patterns of mobilisation in diasporic spaces, as compared to the home country.

But what characterises the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is that it also involves the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh authorities. In principle, they could be considered as belonging to the same 'side' as Armenia and the Armenian diaspora, but in fact mistrust prevails between all these actors too. For instance, the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh authorities consider the diaspora's outreach to be counterproductive: 'The diaspora is often unrealistic when complaining about home country policies. From outside you can't judge properly what is right and what is wrong' (representative 1 of the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh government, interview, 3 December 2016). In addition, many in Nagorno-Karabakh think that the Armenian diaspora does not defend them because of their specific history and culture, but as a part of their Armenian homeland seen through the prism of the 1915 genocide: 'The diaspora does not look at Nagorno-Karabakh as a separate entity' (representative 3 of the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh government, interview, 5 December 2016). Authorities in Yerevan and Stepanakert also share a wariness towards the diaspora's strength and size, which give it an unwelcome weight in their own internal politics (representative 2 of the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh government, interview, 5 December 2016).

These political dynamics largely explain why the Armenian diaspora, as well as other civil society groups, has always been side-lined in the official discussions around the conflict, which have been characterised by their top-down and elitist nature.[7] In addition, the diaspora's fragmentation and internal divisions hinder its representation in official peace discussions, because it lacks a main interlocutor (representative 2 of the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh government, interview, 5 December 2016). As they were excluded from the negotiation process, Armenian diaspora groups 'logically developed their own interpretations, narratives and claims about the conflict' (Armenian civil society organisation 2, interview, 1 December 2016).

In parallel, since the 2020 War and the clashes that occurred in 2022, the rift between authorities in Yerevan and Stepanakert has grown deeper than ever, as the *de facto* authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh are resentful of, and feel betrayed by the compromises agreed upon by the Armenian government (high level diplomat, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, informal discussion, 26 July 2022), and especially by the fact that Yerevan recognised, in October 2022, Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. While the *de facto* authorities have attempted to present Armenia's and Nagorno-Karabakh's fates as irrevocably linked, the discrepancy between Armenia's and Nagorno-Karabakh's narratives has grown wider than ever.

Diverging political objectives and constraints, as well as intersecting and partly overlapping feelings of mistrust, resentment and betrayal therefore explain that the narratives regarding the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh differ in Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and within the diaspora, thereby leading to processes of conflict autonomisation.

**Conclusion**

The case of Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrates that multiple factors influence how, and to what extent, conflicts are transported in diaspora settings. It also sheds light on processes

of conflict autonomisation, whereby transported conflicts focus on different issues, and involve different actors, than conflicts occurring in home countries. Diasporic narratives reflect the political, social and cultural context in countries of residence, notably because they frame issues in ways that are most likely to attract sympathy and support. For instance, as we have seen, the fact that political lobbying is more openly practiced in the USA than in France or Russia means that the Armenian diaspora settled in the USA will not only be more likely to be involved in high-level political activities, but also to frame the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in terms that resonate with US politics (ANCA, 2020b). In addition, the weight of the political culture, calling for instance for a peaceful coexistence of Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Russia, can explain that certain means of actions, and narratives, are preferred to others (Kim, 2020). Further, diaspora mobilisation is heavily influenced by the way the war is understood by national audiences, as the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has been brought into (and seen through) domestic disputes. In France for instance, and although religion does not play a major role in the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, the conflict is largely read through the prism of Christianity vs. Islam (Toranian, 2020). It is therefore not surprising that religious symbols and slogans figured pre-eminently during demonstrations and events organised in France by all concerned diasporas. This finding highlights a significant gap in the literature with regards to how the host country's own debates shape diaspora narratives. Future research can look into this topic and go beyond explanations that focus on opportunity structures as well as foreign policy priorities of host states.

Other factors, such as the respective sizes and weight of the relevant diasporas, influence conflict autonomisation patterns: where they are smaller, like in the case of the Azerbaijani diaspora in France, they tend to ally with others—in that case, the Turkish diaspora—and adapt their narratives accordingly. Histories of migration, and particularly the time of arrival of diasporic groups in host countries, also play a central role on who they perceive to be the enemy. Where the history of diaspora formation differs, like in the case of the Armenian diaspora in Russia as compared to France and the USA, it leads not just to different conflict narratives, but also to different patterns of physical confrontation.

The contribution shows that collective traumas also play a significant role in transportation of conflict narratives and their autonomisation. But what the study of this case specifically demonstrates is that diasporic mobilisation is directly impacted by the diasporas' exclusion or inclusion from political processes back home, and by diaspora engagement policies implemented by their home countries. The fact that the Armenian diaspora has been mostly considered by both the Armenian government and the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh authorities as a provider of remittances and development support, but not as a legitimate political actor, can be considered as a major explanation for conflict autonomisation patterns. Indeed, it has pushed various Armenian diaspora groups to adopt their own political stance, largely disconnected from political discourses in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and influenced by their own political interests, as well as by the context in their countries of residence.

## Notes

1. Diaspora is a contested concept. Please see Baser (2015), Féron (2017) and Grossman (2019) for an overview of these debates.

2. During the 2022 French presidential elections campaign for instance, two candidates, Valérie Pécresse and Éric Zemmour (respectively traditional right-wing and extreme right-wing) visited Armenia.
3. The original statement can be found here: https://fadn.gov.ru/press-centr/news/v-fadn-rossii-sostoyalas-vstrecha-prezidenta-fnka-azerbajdzhanczev-rossii-m.sadyigovoj-i-prezidenta-fnka-armyan-rossii-a.abramyana.
4. Created in 2013 and currently composed of 69 members, it is open to any French elected official. Cercle d'Amitié France-Artsakh (n.d.). *Qui sommes-nous?* https://www.france-artsakh.fr/qui-sommes-nous/.
5. Conseil Régional d'Île de France (2020, 15 October). *Motion*. https://www.iledefrance.fr/sites/default/files/medias/2020/10/MOTION-CPdu15octobre2020%28adoptee%29.pdf.
6. Diaspora High Commissioner Office Armenia (2020, 30 September). *Dear brothers and sisters, The enemy has once again declared war against the Armenian people by launching an attack on*. [Video attached]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/DiasporaHighCommissionerOfficeArmenia/.
7. Not to forget the fact that the Azerbaijani diaspora is much smaller than the Armenian one, meaning that including diasporas would dramatically shift the balance towards the Armenian side. Official representative 3 of the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (interview, 2 December 2016) and Armenian civil society organisation 1 (interview, 1 December 2016).

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