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Exploring Peace Perspectives in Post-War Azerbaijan:

A Comparative Analysis of Governmental and Civil Society Views on Conflict Resolution

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how the concept of “peace” is discursively constructed in post-war Azerbaijan following the 2020 Second Karabakh War and the 2023 military operation that solidified Azerbaijan’s control over Nagorno-Karabakh. It compares and contrasts the peace narratives advanced by the Azerbaijani government and civil society actors. While the government promotes a securitized and state-centric vision of peace, often referred to as “Winner’s Peace”, that emphasizes territorial integrity, military victory, and regime stability, civil society actors advocate for a more inclusive, justice-oriented, and transformative approach rooted in liberal peacebuilding principles.

Through qualitative discourse analysis of political speeches, media statements, civil society publications, and interviews with peace activists, the research identifies key divergences and occasional overlaps between these two narratives. The study finds that the government’s discourse aligns with the framework of illiberal peace, marginalizing dissenting voices and excluding reconciliation-based approaches. In contrast, civil society actors, though politically constrained, promote people-to-people dialogue, transitional justice, and historical recognition. The thesis concludes that peace in Azerbaijan remains a contested and politically charged concept, shaped by asymmetrical power relations that limit pluralistic discourse and constrain prospects for sustainable conflict transformation.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
1. Theoretical Framework	8
1.1 Defining Peace	8
1.2 Liberal Peace and Liberal Peacebuilding	14
1.3 Winner's Peace as an Illiberal Peace Framework	21
1.4 Nina Caspersen's Peace Agreements	25
2. Research Design	31
2.1 Research Problem	31
2.2 Justification of Research Method	31
2.3. Limitations and Ethical Protocols	34
Analysis	36
3. Government's Perspective	40
3.1 The State's Illiberal Peace Discourse	40
3.2 Winner's Peace	41
3.3 Historical legitimation	43
3.4 Exclusion of pluralism	44
4. Civil Society's Counter-Discursive Role	48
4.1 Reconceptualization of Peace	49
4.2 Documentation and Transnational Advocacy	52
4.3 Challenges for Civil Society Discourse	53
5. Divergence and Convergence in Peace Narratives	58
5.1 Divergence: Competing Visions of Peace	58
5.2 Convergence: Unexpected Overlaps	60

Conclusion	65
Bibliography	67
Appendices	78

Introduction

Azerbaijan has experienced a significant transformation in its post-war trajectory, particularly following its decisive victory in the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and later the full control over the Nagorno-Karabakh region in 2023 after another offensive. This resulted in the end of a 30-year territorial conflict with Armenia, fundamentally reshaping the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus. The dissolution of the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (Krivosheev, 2023) and the Armenian population leaving the region reinforced Azerbaijan's narrative of territorial integrity and national sovereignty. However, the post-war period has also introduced new complexities and challenges, particularly regarding the nature of a potential peace and the contradictory narratives surrounding it in the country.

Despite the cessation of hostilities and the restoration of territorial control over the full territory, a sustainable and mutually agreed peace with Armenia remains puzzling and distant. Although Azerbaijani state discourse frequently emphasizes the language of “peace,” the meaning of this term remains strategically ambiguous and intentionally linked to discourses of military victory, infrastructure development, and national pride (Davtyan, 2025). Meanwhile, alternative peace visions, often articulated by anti-government civil society actors, focus on dialogue, reconciliation with Armenians, and a democratic government with an inclusive approach regarding the current state. These contradicting perspectives reveal a deeper tension: while the state attempts to frame “peace” as a unilateral achievement deriving from sovereignty and stability, civil society actors seek a more transformative, dialogical approach rooted in liberal peacebuilding principles.

This discursive disputation between the parties reflects broader debates in peace studies. Drawing on Johan Galtung’s (1969) influential distinction between negative peace (the absence of violence) and positive peace (the presence of justice and reconciliation), this thesis examines how these concepts are mobilized within post-war Azerbaijani narratives. Additionally, the research is enriched by the theory of illiberal peace (Lewis, 2020; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2016), which explains and critiques peacebuilding models that prioritize regime security, state control, and coercive stability over participatory and democratic processes. Azerbaijan’s post-war approach, labeled by top-down decision-making, narrative control, and political marginalization of civil society voices, resonates with this illiberal peace framework.

At the same time, Azerbaijani civil society, including intellectuals, peace practitioners, and non-governmental organizations, offers alternative frameworks for peace, drawing on liberal and emancipatory models (Doyle, 2005; Lederach, 1999; Richmond, 2012). While civil society in Azerbaijan is politically constrained, these actors emphasize mutual recognition of the past, historical dialogue, and grassroots engagement as essential to lasting peace in the region. Their marginalization raises key questions about power dynamics and legitimacy in constructing post-war narratives and long-lasting peace in authoritarian regimes.

This thesis aims to explore how "peace" is discursively framed in post-war Azerbaijan, exploring the contradictory narratives discussed and constructed by the Azerbaijani government and civil society actors. The study examines several key questions in this context. First, it will explore how the Azerbaijani government frames "peace" following the 2020 war and the 2023 operation, and how the state's broader political goals shape this framing. Second, it investigates how Azerbaijani civil society actors construct alternative visions of peace against the governmental narratives, focusing on the values and principles they strongly advocate, such as historical dialogue, reconciliation, and transitional justice, with a focus on people-to-people and liberal approaches. The research also compares the key points of convergence and divergence between the governmental and civil society framings of peace, highlighting areas where these perspectives align or conflict. Finally, the study explores how discursive power asymmetries, such as state control over media and civil space, influence the way in which peace narratives are legitimized, heard, or marginalized in the public sphere, also rooted in many authoritarian regimes. These questions help uncover how power dynamics shape the construction of peace in Azerbaijan, both at the state and civil society levels.

Methodologically, this study employs qualitative discourse analysis to examine official and civil society narratives on peace. The research identifies how different actors frame key concepts such as justice, reconciliation, and security by analyzing government speeches, policies, and public statements alongside civil society reports, media, and interviews. A comparative lens allows for identifying overlapping and conflicting logics, revealing the power structures embedded in the discursive production of peace.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical framework, introducing competing conceptualizations of peace, with particular attention to the contrast between liberal and illiberal peacebuilding, as well as Galtung's model of negative and positive peace. Chapter 2 outlines the research design, detailing the methodological choices and data collection strategies. Chapter 3 offers a detailed analysis of the state's illiberal peace discourse, identifying the rhetorical strategies, historical legitimations, and exclusionary practices that sustain it. Chapter 4 turns to civil society perspectives, highlighting their emancipatory and dialogical approaches to peace despite structural and political constraints. Finally, Chapter 5 presents a comparative synthesis of the two narratives, analyzing points of convergence and divergence, the asymmetries of discursive power, and the broader implications for sustainable peacebuilding in authoritarian contexts like Azerbaijan.

This thesis contributes to the broader scholarship on peace and conflict studies by examining how peace is not only implemented through practice but actively constructed through discourse. It provides us with insight into how dominant narratives shape the political legitimacy of a term or a concept, marginalize contradicting opinions, and determine the boundaries and pillars of post-conflict order. Through the lens of discourse, this study reveals how the very meaning of peace can become a site of struggle in post-war societies with an authoritarian regime, such as Azerbaijan.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1 Defining Peace

As a multilevel and dynamically shifting concept, peace has been the main subject of various scholarly research disciplines such as political science, international relations, sociology, and recently, peace studies as a separate discipline. This section explores the theoretical foundations of peace, examining its linguistic, cultural, and academic dimensions and its evolution as a term and a field of study over time. By integrating diverse perspectives and the term's evolution, this framework provides a comprehensive understanding of "peace" and how it has been constructed, identified, defined, and utilized throughout the years. This will serve as the basis for analyzing peace perspectives and their discursive construction in Azerbaijan.

Linguistic and Cultural Dimensions of Peace

The concept of peace varies significantly across linguistic and cultural contexts depending on the geography and time. In Western languages, peace is often defined in terms of the absence of war and the non-existence or lower(est) existence of violence. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines peace as “freedom from, or cessation of, war or hostilities; that condition of a nation or community in which it is not at war with another” (Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 383). This definition reflects a traditional Western explanation of peace as the opposite or lack of conflict, often referred to as “negative peace” in conflict studies. (Galtung, 1969).

In contrast, Eastern interpretations of peace tend to adopt a more positive framing, emphasizing the presence of harmonious conditions rather than the mere absence of violence due to their traditions and societal beliefs. Royce Anderson (2004) highlights this distinction, noting that peace in many Eastern traditions is understood as “a condition in which individuals, families, groups, communities, and/or nations experience low levels of violence and engage in mutually harmonious relationships”. This notion suggests that in Eastern cultures where societal bonds and traditions are prioritized, lasting peace is achieved by mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation between the parties.

Anderson’s (2004) definition of peace also highlights two crucial aspects: peace as a measurable condition and peace as a subjective experience. According to Anderson, peace can be assessed

using objective indicators such as statistical data on violence levels, crime rates, or diplomatic engagements, if peace is accepted as a condition in a political environment. These given metrics provide quantifiable measures of peace, equipping researchers with tools to track changes over time and across contexts.

However, peace is also a subjective experience in its nature, shaped by individual and collective perceptions of factors such as safety, harmony, and well-being. Subjective measures, such as surveys or interviews, are essential for understanding and exploring the lived experiences of peace among individuals and groups. Anderson (2004) emphasizes that peace is experienced across multiple contexts or “system levels,” sometimes separate, sometimes overlapping, a concept rooted in Galtung’s (1969) framework of social systems and actors.

Negative and Positive Peace

The academic study of peace has been profoundly influenced by Johan Galtung and his distinction between negative and positive peace (Galtung, 1969). The term “negative peace” refers to the absence of direct violence, such as war, armed conflict or physical harm by a larger group. This dimension is measured along a continuum, with lower levels of violence indicating higher levels of peace. However, according to Galtung (1969), negative peace alone is inadequate to define a truly peaceful society. He argued that it does not address the full elimination of structural and cultural violence, concepts that Galtung introduced to explain more subtle or hidden forms of violence. Ceasefires, cold wars, or temporary truces might reduce direct violence for a while, however, they do not represent genuine peace.

Conversely, positive peace extends beyond the simple idea of just absence of conflict. It represents the presence of harmonious relationships and social conditions that can create long-term stability within societies. Galtung (1969) argues that positive peace is associated with cooperation, integration, and social justice. The measure of this dimension is not only preventing the conflict and direct violence, but actively creating spaces that foster mutual understanding and respect, and address the structural inequalities. Thus, positive peace requires a more extensive approach where economic, social, and cultural aspects are also taken into consideration.

The interplay between negative and positive peace is particularly relevant in post-conflict societies like Azerbaijan, where the legacy of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict continues to shape

peacebuilding efforts in the country. While negative peace has been partially achieved through ceasefire and delimitation agreements, the absence of violence does not guarantee the presence of positive peace.

Philosophical and Religious Perspectives on Peace

The conceptualization of peace is also deeply linked with philosophical and religious traditions. Immanuel Kant's essay *Perpetual Peace* (1795) remains a cornerstone of peace studies, advocating for republican governance, economic interdependence, and international law as foundations for lasting peace. He argues that republican governance is essential for the importance of representative democracy, individual liberties, and the rule of law, fostering an environment where the propensity of war is reduced.

Kant's ideas have influenced the discourse on peace. Contemporary democratic peace theory builds upon his principles, which posits that democratic states are less likely to engage in conflict with one another (Doyle, 1983; Hayes, 2012). The theory suggests that democratic states, by their nature, tend to resolve their conflicts through dialogue rather than going into war. Thus, the theory shows a strong link between democratic regimes and enduring peace, where values, norms, and institutions play a significant role in promoting peaceful conflict resolution. However, theory also does not fully eliminate the fact that democracies are more likely to go to war with non-democracies. This aspect of the theory highlights the complexity where, while democracies might opt for a peaceful resolution with each other, they still engage in war against non-democratic parties.

Religious traditions also offer rich reflections on peace, often emphasizing moral constraints on war and violence. While few religions outright prohibit war, many advocate for peace as a moral imperative. For example, the Christian tradition has contributed to the development of the just war theory, which outlines ethical guidelines for engaging in conflict (Lawler, 2008). Similarly, Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism and Taoism emphasize inner peace and harmony as pathways to societal well-being.

Different Types of Peace

While Galtung's (1969) initial distinction between negative and positive peace remains central to peace studies to this day, the field has undergone a variety of innovations and transformations to include a new range of other conceptualizations of peace. These include terms such as just peace, liberal peace, emancipatory peace, everyday peace, and hybrid peace. Each of these concepts offers unique insights into the complexities of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, emphasizing the evolving nature of peace research and its adaptation to diverse contexts and challenges.

One of the early expansions of Galtung's framework is the concept of just peace, introduced by John Paul Lederach (1999). Lederach defines just peace as "an adaptive process-structure of human relationships characterized by high justice and low violence" and "an infrastructure of organization or governance that responds to human conflict through nonviolent means as first and last resorts" (Lederach, 1999; Kim, Mitchell, & Wylie, 2024), highlighting the role of understanding human interactions to manage conflicts effectively. This concept emphasizes the dual, yet linked goals of reducing violence and promoting justice, aligning closely with Galtung's notion of positive peace, however, with a significant focus on relational transformation between parties and communities.

Lederach (2005) articulates his advocacy for approaches that "reduce violence and destructive cycles of social interaction and at the same time increase justice in any human relationships". While Galtung's positive peace focuses on structural conditions such as economic equality, political representation, and social inclusion, Lederach's just peace prioritizes the transformation of relationships between conflicting parties. This relational focus is particularly relevant in post-conflict societies, where rebuilding trust and fostering cooperation are essential for sustainable peace. In such contexts, the link between justice and peace becomes a pillar for successful conflict resolution, based on community building and relational cooperation.

Liberal peace emerged in the post-Cold War era, following a significant shift in how peace and peacebuilding are conceptualized on a global level. The framework reflects the interplay between several key factors, such as liberal democracy, market economies, and international organizations in promoting peace. Heathershaw (2008) and Russett (2010) argue that the decline in interstate conflicts since World War II can be associated with the widespread adoption of liberal democratic norms, economic interdependence, and the role of international institutions in the world for

resolving conflicts and creating cooperation. The liberal peace framework is built upon several foundational features, such as international law, free trade, democracy, and individual rights as foundational elements of peace (Kim et al., 2024). These factors are seen to be interlinked components of a stable and peaceful international order.

However, despite the large adoption of the framework, the liberal peace model has faced significant criticism for its top-down approach. Scholars and critics argue that its tendency to impose external solutions on local contexts may not be relevant or suitable in different structural and cultural contexts. Paris (2004) highlights several examples of liberal peacebuilding failures, such as in Angola, Rwanda, and Bosnia, where externally imposed democratic elections and economic reforms re-escalated the tensions and sometimes even reignited violence rather than leading to a peaceful resolution. These shortcomings have led scholars to explore alternative approaches to peace that seek to create more effective and inclusive spaces for peace.

In response to the limitations of liberal peacebuilding, scholars like Visoka and Richmond (2017) have proposed the concept of emancipatory peace. This approach moves beyond the liberal peace paradigm by emphasizing local agency, postcolonial perspectives, and the need to address structural and political obstacles to peace. Emancipatory peace is defined as “a postliberal form of peace, which implies that locally legitimate authorities and peace enablers would work with external forces against obstacles to peace, whether structural or political, in postcolonial, pluriversal, empathetic, and emancipatory terms” (Visoka & Richmond, 2017). The definition highlights the necessity of collaboration between local authorities and external forces in order to create a new path that acknowledges and respects the local context of the conflict.

Thus this concept highlights the importance of empowering local communities in conflict-affected areas. By focusing on the voices and needs of the people who are directly affected by conflict, emancipatory peace aims to address the root causes of conflict, such as inequality and marginalization. By prioritizing the local context and the experience of the people, emancipatory peace offers a more inclusive and sustainable alternative to traditional peacebuilding models, which often attempt to impose external solutions without recognizing the local context.

Another significant contribution to peace studies is the concept of everyday peace, which focuses on the importance of the micro-level interactions and the coping mechanisms of individuals and

communities residing in conflict-affected areas and societies. According to Mac Ginty (2014), everyday peace can be defined as various ways that people navigate life in deeply divided societies. This navigation often includes strategies such as avoiding contentious issues or constructive ambiguity, which helps to minimize risks and foster relationships among the community members. Everyday peace functions in spaces where formal peacebuilding efforts may be lacking, absent, or ineffective. It includes a variety of coping mechanisms, such as deliberately avoiding sensitive topics in divided or mixed communities where tensions exist. It also includes more proactive efforts to challenge the stale or fixated nature of conflicts (Mac Ginty, 2014). This bottom-up approach highlights the agency and resilience of ordinary people in building peace in their daily challenges, often in ways that are overlooked by top-down interventions to promote co-existence and understanding within the community.

The concept of hybrid peace is another important framework that explores the complex relationship between international peacebuilding efforts, that often characterized as liberal and local resistance or adaptation towards these initiatives in the society. Mac Ginty (2011) describes hybrid peace as the result of interactions between top-down such as international organizations and governmental actors, and bottom-up peace agents and structures, such as local communities and people-to-people approach. These two approaches together create alternative forms of peace that reflect local-specific realities, conditions, and priorities.

Richmond (2015) adds another layer to the framework by acknowledging that hybrid peace can be seen as “somewhat overloaded as a conceptual framework,” but argues that it captures the “contingent and complex nature of the politics of peacemaking and the dynamics of power, agency, and identity” involved. This perspective admits that hybrid peace is not a concept that fits all, but a detailed practice that must consider both sides. By bridging the gap between international and local actors, hybrid peace offers a more sophisticated understanding of peacebuilding that compromises the limitations of reductionist approaches.

The diversity of peace concepts, from just peace and liberal peace to emancipatory peace, everyday peace, and hybrid peace, reflects the evolving nature of peace studies and its continuous adaptation to changing global contexts. Each concept offers unique insights into the challenges and opportunities of peacebuilding, highlighting the importance of justice, local agency, and relational

transformation. By integrating these diverse perspectives, this framework offers a comprehensive foundation for analyzing peacebuilding efforts in Azerbaijan. The country's unique interplay of historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors makes it necessary for a multifaceted approach to peace. Understanding these perspectives is important, as they influence the discursive construction of narratives around peace based on their own framework.

1.2 Liberal Peace and Liberal Peacebuilding

The liberal peace paradigm, which has dominated and played a significant role in international conflict resolution efforts since the end of the Cold War, is fundamentally influenced by Enlightenment political philosophy. It particularly derives from Immanuel Kant's proposition that republican states, which are characterized by the rule of law, economic interdependence, and international institutions, are less prone to engage in warfare (Doyle, 1983).

This theoretical framework was translated into practice and gained more popularity following the Cold War through extensive peacebuilding interventions in post-conflict societies, from Bosnia to East Timor. The main objective of these interventions was that international actors attempted to construct liberal democratic institutions as the foundation for sustainable peace (Paris, 2004). The proponents argue that these efforts can effectively transform conflict-affected areas and deeply divided societies by prompting a governance based on liberal democratic ideas.

The liberal peace paradigm functions on three fundamental assumptions. First, it claims that competitive electoral systems and mechanisms for checks on executive power inherently reduce conflict by channeling political grievances into nonviolent institutional processes (Russett, 2010). This approach creates space and allows citizens to express their stance and dissatisfaction and achieve necessary political change without going into violent outbursts. The assumption also asserts that democracies are more adaptable to internal shifts and demand, and they can accommodate diverse interests through dialogue and negotiation.

The second assumption claims that market liberalization and economic integration create mutual interests among the states or stakeholders that discourage violent conflict (Barnett & Zuercher, 2009). It is believed that when parties are economically interlinked, the costs of a destructive war

are considered unacceptably high, making cooperation and partnership a more preferable choice. It also explores the idea that economic ties between states can play a role as a buffer against hostile conflicts and promote a more peaceful global environment.

Finally, the framework asserts that robust civil society participation and the protection of human rights are essential for legitimizing post-conflict political orders (Richmond, 2006). The main argument here is that inclusive governance, which includes and allows a variety of interactions and genuine engagement from different societal groups, along with protecting individual rights, fosters a stronger, more resilient political system in the country. This involvement ensures that everyone's voice is heard, particularly those who are directly affected by the consequences of the conflict.

These assumptions together reflect a comprehensive approach to peace that involves political, economic, and social dimensions in the conflict. However, this paradigm has been subjected to extensive critique from multiple theoretical perspectives that challenge its universal applicability and normative assumptions.

Postcolonial scholars, such as Mark Duffield (2007), have made persuasive arguments that liberal peacebuilding often functions as a form of neo-colonial governance. This process, frequently imposing externally designed political and economic systems, frequently exacerbates rather than resolves societal divisions. An example of these dynamics can be seen in Afghanistan, where the rushed and improper implementation of electoral democracy failed to restore the power structures. Without addressing existing power structures, the process simply transformed warlords into parliamentarians, institutionalizing violent patronage networks rather than creating inclusive governance and re-escalating the conflict in the country once again. (Suhrke, 2011).

Feminist critiques added another level of complexity by explaining how technocratic approaches to peacebuilding often marginalize women's specific security needs and political participation. Rather than creating true gender equality and gender sensitive resolution methods, these approaches reduce gender equality to puppet representation in formal processes while deliberately ignoring the contributions and initiatives of women's peace movements (Mac Ginty, 2014).

These critical perspectives are particularly relevant when examining the Azerbaijani context, where the government's nominal commitment to liberal democratic principles through

participation in international organizations and periodic elections. However, these liberal-democratic practices coexist with authoritarian practices that systematically undermine political pluralism and civil liberties (Lewis et al., 2018).

Operational Models of Liberal Peacebuilding

The implementation of liberal peacebuilding in practice through various conflict zones has unfolded through three distinct models that reflect varying degrees of coercion and local participation. The spectrum of these approaches emphasizes the complexities of post-conflict reconstruction and challenges experienced when external actors attempt to impose liberal democratic frameworks onto different societies.

The first and most widespread approach, often termed as the conservative model, is predominantly characterized by a top-down approach. It is exemplified by U.S.-led military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, which place a strong emphasis on prioritization of military stabilization and rapid institutionalization of formal democratic processes through externally imposed timelines (Richmond, 2006). The main argument of this approach is that elections and market liberalization will serve as pillars for societal transformation, presuming that such measures will address the underlying divisions between communities.

However, this model's fundamental flaw lies in its oversimplified assumption that the implementation of democratic institutions and mechanical imposition can swiftly transform deeply divided societies. This assumption has been discredited by the resurgence of violence in both cases given above, revealing an evident disconnect between the theory and reality. In Iraq, particularly, the Coalition Provisional Authority's decision to dissolve the existing military apparatus without creating inclusive alternatives directly contributed to the rise of insurgent groups and ultimately ISIS (Porter, 2018). Moreover, conservative models' focus on rapid democratization and market-oriented reforms often ignores the essential prerequisites for more durable peace, such as inclusive governance structures that represent various political cultures and social classes. Thus, the imposition of external political decisions can lead to strong resistance, delegitimization, and social denial.

The second approach, known as the orthodox model, is usually associated with UN peace operations in various post-conflict areas, such as Kosovo and Timor-Leste. This model attempts

to balance top-down institution-building with limited civil society consultation (Paffenholz, 2010). Paffenholz (2010) explains that while this approach avoids the tactics provided by the conservative approach, it still remains fundamentally elite-centric. Thus, the model often prioritizes or gives privileges to power-sharing arrangements between armed factions, at the expense of meaningful grassroots reconciliation.

The 1995 Dayton Accords that ended the Bosnian War provide a clear example of this model's limitations. Rather than dismantling the ethnic divisions, the Accords actually established a constitutional system that institutionalized these divisions on the systemic level (Belloni, 2001). Moreover, this model's reliance on power-sharing arrangements and exclusive nature can re-escalate the violence in post-conflict contexts. By prioritizing the contradictory interests of elite fractions, the model may neglect the true essence of the conflict, thereby creating even deeper divisions.

The third and most progressive model of liberal peacebuilding, referred to as emancipatory peacebuilding, emphasizes bottom-up approaches that center the needs of marginalized communities and prioritize transformative justice (Richmond, 2012). This model attempts to address the underlying injustices and root causes of the conflict, advocating for a more transformative version of justice and fundamental alteration of social, political, and economic structures in the system. This approach stresses several key elements, such as participatory governance, historical reckoning, and redistributive justice, elements that have been previously absent in most official peacebuilding efforts.

While emancipatory peace is considered theoretically compelling, aligning with the principles of a liberal approach such as social justice and human rights, its implementation has been proven to be challenging. The reason behind these challenges is the resistance from both national elites who fear losing power or privilege and from international actors who often prioritize stability and maintenance of the status quo over the model's more long-term transformative approach (Richmond, 2012). The key point here lies in the intention of shifting the paradigm from conflict management to conflict transformation.

Civil Society in Peacebuilding

The role of civil society in peacebuilding has been predominantly framed through the lens of the liberal peacebuilding approaches. Liberal peace posits that civil society organizations (CSOs) are essential for democratization, facilitating and initiating conflict resolution, and enabling successful post-war reconstruction (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2006). Within the framework of liberal peacebuilding, civil society is seen as the pusher for social cohesion and a guardian of liberal and democratic principles, particularly by monitoring state compliance with peace agreements, and advocates for marginalized groups (Diamond, 1994). It plays a role as a counterbalance and a checker to the state power, promoting more inclusive and just dialogue between the conflict parties.

Diamond (1994) identifies four core functions of civil society in this context. Firstly, civil society organizations and actors serve as watchdogs to ensure government accountability. They monitor state actions, consistently report on human rights violations, and also provide a platform for engagement. This function is particularly important in transforming societies where the government may be weak or the state mechanism may be corrupted. Secondly, the advocacy role of CSOs promotes minority voices and marginalized groups, which might be overlooked in political discourse due to their disadvantaged position in the system. They play a crucial role in expressing the needs and concerns of these communities, thus encouraging much larger inclusivity and influence on the government. Thirdly, civil society plays an important role as dialogue facilitators, where they mediate and build bridges between divided communities in conflict situations. By doing so, they can help foster mutual understanding, decrease tensions and create a more constructive environment for negotiations. Finally, the civil society can deliver essential services in contexts where the government is unwilling or unable to provide. These services can range from providing humanitarian aid to the conflict-affected people to implementing reconciliation programs.

However, critical peacebuilding scholars challenge this assumption. They argue that the implementation of liberal peacebuilding through civil society and promotion of CSOs must be critically examined as liberal models often impose Western democratic ideals without considering and evaluating the local power structures, historical grievances, or existing state coercion (Richmond, 2010; Mac Ginty, 2011). For instance, particularly within authoritarian and hybrid regimes, civil society does not function as an independent entity. Instead, it is frequently co-opted

by the state, fragmented by contradictory interests and goals, or entirely suppressed by the system, proving liberal expectations unrealistic (Carothers, 2015). This tension between the system and civil society and the realities it brings with itself makes it necessary to understand the complexities and relations between normative ideals and on-the-ground realities, of how civil society operates, and survives in restrictive political environments.

Moreover, another insight can be understanding and analyzing the ways in which civil society actors adapt to authoritarian or repressive regimes, shift between political obstacles, and navigate restrictive legal frameworks. This can offer much more critical information about the evolution and resilience of civil society, how they innovate new strategies for advocacy and accountability under pressure.

Typologies of civil society

Civil society in nature is not a monolithic and single entity but a diverse field comprising actors with varying degrees of autonomy and influence. This diversity is crucial for us to understand the different roles that civil society plays in political processes, especially in the context of conflict and peacebuilding. Scholars have identified several key typologies to analyze this variety of actors systematically, depending on the relations and power balance with the state.

One of the classifications is the category of Government-Organized NGOs (GONGOs). These state-aligned groups are specifically designed and structured to imitate independent civil society while promoting regime interests and objectives through different channels. The peacebuilding role of these organizations is typically superficial as they reinforce dominant official state narratives rather than contributing to a genuine reconciliation process (Carothers, 2015). Examples include Russia's "patriotic" NGOs and Azerbaijan's state-funded forums (Aliyev, 2023).

In contrast, independent non-governmental organizations (NGOs) represent a critical and widely-understood part of the civil society umbrella. These organizations advocate for human rights, provide minority protections, and facilitate dialogues among divided groups. However, their existence and functions face repression in authoritarian contexts. Their ability of independent NGOs to effectively contribute to peacebuilding initiatives is highly dependent on the political space available for their operation. (Howell & Pearce, 2001). In the cases of repression or hostile

environment, these organizations face obstacles, such as legal restrictions, scrutiny by the state media, and even violence, hindering their influence and outreach.

Furthermore, grassroots and informal movements contribute to the civil society as another essential layer of it. These actors usually consist of community-based groups such as women's collectives and youth networks, which typically operate outside formal structures. While they may avoid openly political work to be able to navigate and survive in harsh political conditions, they still contribute to local-level reconciliation (Bebbington et al., 2008). Their activities often derive from lived experiences and local needs, thus providing essential understanding and support for local conflict resolution and community cohesion.

These distinctions mentioned above highlight the fragmented and contradictory nature of civil society, particularly in environments where state control is inescapable. This kind of fragmentation not only complicates the landscape of civil engagement but also highlights the necessity for understanding different extents of players in the system. The tension between state-funded actors and independent organizations can influence the narrative of peace depending on the power balance.

Understanding these typologies is crucial for several reasons. First, it allows scholars and practitioners to map the various players within civil society and assess their roles and influences. This analysis can illuminate not only the existing power dynamics but also how these dynamics shift over time, especially in response to political changes or crises. For instance, during periods of heightened authoritarianism, independent organizations may face increased repression, consequently altering their strategies and the narratives they promote.

Second, an examination of the interactions among different civil society actors expands our comprehension of narrative construction. Civil society is not monolithic; rather, it consists of a spectrum of voices that may agree, contest, or coexist in a complex interplay of narratives. Understanding these interactions is vital in the political sphere as they can significantly shape public perceptions, policy debates, and the broader cultural context in which peace is framed.

Furthermore, the framing of peace itself is not merely a matter of presenting a set of ideas but involves a strategic construction of narratives that resonate with various stakeholders. For example, state narratives may focus on stability and security, potentially sidelining justice and

reconciliation issues that are critical to many independent organizations. This narrative divergence can lead to competing visions of peace, thereby complicating efforts to build consensus.

1.3 Winner's Peace as an Illiberal Peace Framework

The concept of "Winner's Peace" can be contextualized closely with the broader theoretical framework of "Illiberal Peace," which has emerged as a term used to critically analyze the form of peace process where peace is established and maintained through coercive measures, power asymmetry, and imposed stability rather than mutual agreement or democratic processes. This conceptualization also aligns with the post-conflict contexts in authoritarian regimes where the state's approach to peace is characterized by maximizing its own benefits based on its interests, avoiding compromise. Moreover, dictating the terms of peace based on military victory proves an illiberal peace framework as a general conceptualization of the winner's peace.

Scholars such as David Lewis (2020), Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver Richmond (2016), and Kristian Gleditsch (2021) have extensively analyzed the nature of illiberal peace, emphasizing its focus on state control, regime survival, and the exclusion of civil participation. This is particularly relevant in situations where the victors of the conflict impose hegemonic control over the peace process that serves their interests, therefore marginalizing the opposite side in the conflict, and more broadly, including civil society, which usually presents a balanced approach.

Illiberal peace can also be understood through different concepts such as "Authoritarian Peace" or "Coercive Peace." Each of these terms highlights a form of conflict resolution that prioritizes state security and regime stability over reconciliation, inclusivity, and democratic governance (Lewis, Heathershaw, & Megoran, 2018). Where liberal peace emphasizes negotiation, compromise, and power-sharing as tools to establish a sustainable peace, illiberal peace is usually imposed unilaterally by the victor of a conflict. This imposition also rejects the potential benefits of international mediation and the regulatory constraints on the use of force in conflict resolution.

This form of peace introduces a paradox that is deeply rooted in the preservation of existing power structures at the expense of the broader aspiration of pluralism in the governance structure. It ensures that the ruling elite remains in control while suppressing opposition and dissent, which are

crucial for democratic progress. Gleditsch (2021) further highlights that this type of peace creates an environment of fear and repression, preventing the emergence of a true, sustainable peace, thereby creating an artificial facade of stability with a fragile political basis.

Another insightful definition is articulated by Lewis et al. (2018), that illiberal peace entails the termination of violent conflict through state coercion, imposition of hierarchical power structures, and the exclusion of non-state actors from the peace process. Thus, illiberal peace is not concerned with resolving the conflict in a more sustainable and durable way (conflict resolution), but simply the cessation of the violent conflict where state authority is preserved intact.

Lewis et al. (2018) also acknowledge that this approach deliberately avoids addressing the root causes of conflict. Rather than creating an environment for more inclusive dialogues and reconciliation, it focuses on the immediate restoration of order by eliminating opposition through military victory, political repression, and economic control. Although military victory and rushed imposition of political order may bring temporary stability, it does not address the root causes and grievances of the conflict. The notion of illiberal peace also challenges the dominant liberal paradigm that peace is synonymous with democracy. It shows the complexity of interplay by demonstrating that peace can be achieved through authoritarian means, albeit at the cost of political freedoms and social justice.

Types of illiberal peace

Smith et al. (2020) elaborate more on the complex dynamics of illiberal peace by categorizing it into three broad categories based on the level of illiberality. This categorization helps analyze the different manifestations of illiberal peace in different conflict contexts.

The first category is known as Thin Illiberal Peace. This approach represents the strategy of temporary use of illiberal means to achieve long-term liberal goals. A common example of this approach is the principle of "institutionalization before liberalization" (Hemche, Billberg & Söndergaard, 2017). This principle suggests that democratic reforms should be delayed until state institutions are considered stable enough to support them. The reasoning behind this is the belief that without strong institutions to support liberal democracy, any step towards democratic governance is likely to be dangerous and potentially counterproductive. Thus, by ensuring to have a strong institutional framework first, the democratic processes can be effectively and smoothly

implemented and legitimized when introduced. However, there is a real risk of prolonged delays in democratization that might strengthen authoritarian practices, thus stalling the process for true liberalization of the system.

The second category is referred to as Medium Illiberal Peace. This type is characterized by a more pragmatic approach to peacekeeping. In this scenario, the primary objective is to preserve territorial integrity and state cohesion. The distinction here lies in the acceptance of illiberal practices if they contribute to maintaining stability and unity within the state. In such cases, the outcome of the approach is less concerned with whether the imposed practices are liberal or illiberal in nature, but what matters is the physical and political stability of the state. However, this approach poses a critical issue as the long-term solution, where the lack of a relevant and authentic democratic mandate may lead to further instability.

Finally, Thick Illiberal Peace involves a more intentional transformation where the use of illiberal means is to achieve explicitly illiberal ends. This category is marked by tools such as the establishment of authoritarian or ethnocratic regimes that solidify elite power while systematically undermining political pluralism and the rights of marginalized groups, as noted by Smith et al. (2020). This type of regime usually employs discriminatory policies that favor a particular ethnic or political group, thereby institutionalizing inequality and oppression on the state level. Consequences of this extreme form of illiberal peace extend beyond just immediate political concerns of the government, as they can regenerate cycles of violence and further conflict.

This typology highlights the varying degrees to which illiberal peace can manifest, from temporary illiberal measures to deeply entrenched authoritarian systems. The framework provides a useful lens for analyzing contemporary cases where military victories have led to post-war authoritarianism, often under the guise of stability and national security.

Illiberal peace in practice

Illiberal regimes pursue a goal of establishing a hegemonic narrative that fundamentally delegitimizes not only insurgents and opposition groups but also any political voice that offers an alternative narrative to the state narrative (Owen et al., 2018). This hegemonic narrative functions as a means of social control where the state monopolizes public discourse by controlling media, legislative manipulation, and framing opposition as threats to national security. The consequences

of these strategies ensure that narratives of peace are dictated by the ruling elite, leaving no room for alternative perspectives or criticism.

However, the implications of illiberal peacebuilding practices are not only influencing and controlling the political rhetoric. One of the main aspects involves restricting the physical and political space available to opposition groups or the opposition party in the conflict. This manifests itself in different ways, such as banning political gatherings, persecuting activists, and controlling the digital space to limit the spread of dissenting ideas (Owen et al., 2018). In some cases, governments extend their control beyond national borders by targeting diasporic communities and online networks that challenge the state's narrative.

Illiberal peace is also maintained through economic strategies that centralize wealth and resources within the ruling elite to maintain their grip on power and keep the upper hand. This involves controlling key industries such as energy, telecommunications, and resources, restricting opposition access to financial resources to create a cycle of dependency, and fostering clientelism to ensure loyalty among influential social groups (Smith et al., 2020). By making economic survival dependent on the regime, states prevent alternative power structures from emerging, thereby reinforcing their control over society.

By the 2010s, conflicts increasingly ended in outright military victories rather than negotiated settlements. This trend indicates a return to historical patterns where decisive defeat was the norm that offered the possibility of compromises for lasting peace. This also reveals a potential shift in the international political framework where militaristic solutions are favored over diplomatic engagement and peaceful negotiations. In several instances, these military victories have resulted in what can be termed "illiberal peace."

One prominent example is the Second Chechen War (1999-2009). The Russian government's decision to opt for a military solution rather than engaging in dialogue led to the establishment of authoritarian rule under Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya (Russell, 2014). This regime is characterized by repression and the elimination of opposition, which aligns with the key principles of the illiberal peace model, wherein the stability and consolidation of the state often come at the cost of human rights and democratic progress.

Similarly, the end of hostilities with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 in Sri Lanka is another example of illiberal peace. Following a decisive military victory, the Sri Lankan government established an illiberal peace by consolidating control over Tamil-majority regions. This process was marked by suppressing opposition voices, the persecution of former LTTE members and supporters, and limiting international involvement in reconciliation efforts (Walton & Thiyagaraja, 2020; Spencer, 2010). The government's actions effectively marginalized minority rights and opposition movements, shifting the focus from genuine reconciliation and integration of the Tamil people into the broader society.

Both cases illustrate a common trend in post-conflict conditions in authoritarian regimes where there is a tendency for a prioritization of stability over democratic reforms. This prioritization of authoritarian principles not only hinders the possibility of sustainable peace but also opens new gates for further escalation and violent conflicts.

1.4 Nina Caspersen's *Peace Agreements*

Peace agreements represent a critical topic and a significant factor in conflict trajectories, marking formal transitions from violent confrontations and armed battles to negotiated political processes. While these agreements between conflict parties are often perceived as diplomatic achievements indicating a cessation of hostilities and ground for peace, scholars have argued that their long-term success and effectiveness are far from guaranteed, facing considerable challenges (Walter 2002).

Nina Caspersen's book "Peace Agreements: Finding Solutions to Intra-state Conflicts" (2017) provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the different outcomes of agreements, exploring why some agreements endure while others collapse. She identifies four interconnected factors that are essential for the durability of the agreements: power asymmetry within the distribution of power among parties, legitimacy of the agreement by being accepted by the parties, enforcement mechanisms for ensuring compliance with the agreement, and spoiler management to engage and neutralize their influence.

This section explores Caspersen's arguments in dialogue with broader peace and conflict scholarship. It fosters a multilevel understanding through which to analyze different variables and factors in the context of the Armenia-Azerbaijan post-conflict environment.

The Complexity of Peace Agreement Durability

Caspersen challenges the conventional wisdom regarding peace agreements. She argues that signed agreements should not automatically translate into a definitive solution and be viewed as sustainable peace, but rather they must be understood as “dynamic packages” that contain different interactions between provisions on territory, security, power-sharing, and justice (2017: 15). These elements influence the success of peace agreements and determine their viability.

This aligns with Stedman's (2002) concept of “peace processes as political contests.” Under this framework, signed documents are seen as a starting point for ongoing struggles rather than endpoints in conflict. This view also highlights the need for understanding in which political environment these agreements exist and how they influence the power dynamics and negotiation strategies in the further processes.

The content and specificity of agreements matter profoundly in such cases. Hartzell and Hoddie (2003) found that comprehensive agreements addressing multiple dimensions of conflict have higher survival rates. However, Caspersen argues against excessive ambiguity in agreements, which can postpone critical debates and escalate the tension rather than resolve core disputes (2017: 27). This tension between flexibility and precision in peace agreements also aligns with Bell's (2006) identification of the “peace agreement dilemma.” According to Bell, while detailed provisions may risk alienating signatories who might perceive them as excessive, vague language plants seeds for future conflict by leaving critical issues unresolved.

The limitations of negative peace that were discussed in the previous chapter are particularly present in Caspersen's analysis. Like Galtung (1969), she argues that agreements failing to address structural violence and historical grievances often produce unstable and fragile outcomes (Caspersen 2017: 34). This finding is supported by extensive research showing that peace agreements incorporating transitional justice mechanisms demonstrate greater longevity (Sikkink and Walling 2007; Olsen, Payne, & Reiter, 2010). They argue that these mechanisms are not only

beneficial but essential for avoiding future conflict by reconciling communities, acknowledging past acts of violence, and facilitating a healing process.

Additionally, the importance of inclusivity is another key theme in successful agreements, finds strong support in conflict resolution scholarship (Lounsbury & DeRouen, 2024). Wanis-St. John and Kew (2008) demonstrate through comparative quantitative analysis that agreements that exclude civil society actors have a 35% higher failure rate than those adopting a more inclusive approach. This also highlights the importance of diverse stakeholder engagement in the peace process. Similarly, Paffenholz's (2014) review of 40 peace processes found inclusive negotiations produced more sustainable outcomes by integrating different groups and parties, therefore fostering social cohesion and reducing the probability of future escalation.

Power Asymmetry and the "Winner's Peace" Dilemma

Caspersen's examination of power asymmetry builds on Zartman's (1995) concept of “hurting stalemates” and their absence in imbalanced conflicts. This concept highlights situations where conflicting parties reach a point of mutual exhaustion, forcing them to negotiate. However, in conflicts that indicate strong power asymmetries, these hurting stalemates are absent. Caspersen (2017: 89) argues that when agreements reflect military outcomes rather than negotiated compromises, they tend to institutionalize hierarchies rather than challenge or transform them into more equal relationships, which she refers to as “winner’s peace”.

This dynamic is well-documented in peace studies. Mason et al. (2011) provide empirical evidence that agreements signed under extreme power asymmetry experience 50% more likelihood to fail within five years, highlighting the consequences of agreements that are not derived from mutual concession, but rather prevailing power dynamics. Furthermore, Toft (2010) demonstrates how military victories often produce unstable peace, as they fuel deep resentment among defeated parties.

The cases Caspersen examines, particularly Bosnia's Dayton Accords and Sudan's 2005 agreement, illustrate these patterns vividly. Dayton's creation of ethnically defined territories (2017: 102) reflects what Bose (2002: 2011) critiques as the problematic approach of “partition as peacebuilding.” This approach often results in territorial divisions that sustain tensions within already divided communities. In contrast, Sudan's failure to address core resource-sharing issues

(2017: 110) serves as an example of Le Billion's (2005) "resource curse" thesis in peace processes. The thesis argues that the abundance of valuable natural resources can complicate or hinder peace negotiations, particularly when those resources are unevenly distributed among parties.

Legitimacy and Justice: The Dual Pillars of Sustainable Peace

Caspersen's two-dimensional model of legitimacy, including both elite and popular dimensions, builds upon Beetham's (1991) theory of political legitimacy. Beetham argues that legitimate power must not just be legally valid but also morally justified and socially accepted by the local community. She applies it specifically to peace processes to explore how legitimacy can be fostered in different conflict contexts. Her emphasis on popular legitimacy also aligns with Mac Ginty's (2010) concept of "everyday peace," where local endorsement and engagement determine the implementation success of agreements.

The critical comparison she draws between Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement (2017: 140) and Oslo Accords (2017: 142) displays the contrasting mechanisms of legitimacy in post-conflict contexts. The former has triumphed by a wide public support in a referendum, while the Oslo Accords lacked significant support from the population and were mainly elite-driven. It led to challenges in implementation and long-term sustainability. This supports Widner's (2005) finding that public participation mechanisms increase agreement durability by 40%. This highlights the importance of not only including elite voices but also broad public engagement to have a legitimate peace agreement.

On the topic of transitional justice, Caspersen's exploration of amnesties offers a critical engagement with scholarly debate in the post-conflict context. Snyder and Vinjamuri (2003) argue that pragmatic amnesties are often necessary for peace, serving as an essential tool to facilitate negotiation. However, Sikkink (2011) counters that the push for accountability mechanisms, such as trials or truth commissions, actually contributes more to strengthening the possibility of long-term stability. This position is supported by empirical work by Wiebelhaus-Brahm (2017) on transitional justice and truth commissions, where they play a crucial role in investigating past acts of violence and the construction of an objective narrative of history.

This tension is particularly relevant for Armenia-Azerbaijan, where calls for war crimes accountability (Alici, Grigoryan, & Karimov, 2018) clash with political realities. Addressing past

atrocities may be critical for creating a space for more peaceful negotiations and mutual understanding. However, this idea is usually challenged by the political landscape in both countries, where the narratives of revenge and patriotism still predominantly exist.

Implementation Challenges

Caspersen's typology of enforcement mechanisms, which includes third-party guarantees, power-sharing, and mutual deterrence, provides another layer to the understanding of peace dynamics in conflict and post-conflict contexts. The typology builds on Doyle and Sambanis' (2006) quantitative work on the effectiveness of UN Peacekeeping missions, with Caspersen adding qualitative analysis that considers social and political dimensions as well. Her skepticism regarding heavy international intervention (2017: 166) reflects Autesserre's (2014; 2017) critique of "international peacebuilding cultures." Autesserre raises concerns about foreign interventions that lack a deep understanding of the local context, suggesting that they can escalate tensions rather than eliminate them. In contrast, Walter's (2002) finding argues that strong enforcement can lead to a reduction in conflict recurrence by 70%. These contradictory approaches highlight the complexity of designing effective peacebuilding functions, in which the balance between interventions and non-interventions is essential.

Another layer was added to the discussion when case studies cited by Caspersen support Fortna's (2008) broader argument regarding the role of external influence in the longevity of the peace agreements. Fortna argues that externally guaranteed peace agreements are more likely to maintain longevity, in contrast to those one-sidedly imposed through military victory. This approach highlights the importance of third-party involvement in de-escalating tensions and creating cooperative structures.

Caspersen's (2017: 197) recommended strategies for managing spoilers align with Stedman's foundational work (1997) on the topic, while also incorporating more recent examples, such as the situation in Colombia (2017: 193). Stedman (1997) introduced the idea of "spoilers" in peace processes, explaining them as entities that intentionally disrupt peace efforts because they perceive it as a threat to their interests. He outlined three strategies for managing these spoilers, including inducement, socialization, and coercion, highlighting that peace agreements often falter if spoilers are not adequately managed. Building on this, Nilsson and Svensson (2021) focus on rejectionist

factions, internal groups that refuse to accept peace agreements even when their leaders do. They advocate for the gradual implementation of agreements, security guarantees, and inclusive approaches to help prevent these factions from undermining stability after a deal is reached.

2. Research Design

2.1 Research problem

This study explores the discursive construction of peace within the complex landscape of post-war Azerbaijan through a comprehensive qualitative methodology that combines critical discourse analysis and detailed interviews from civil society. The research design is grounded in the understanding that language not only describes social realities but also actively takes a role in the constitution of those realities. This is especially crucial in contested political environments, where competing actors compete not only for power but also for the authority to shape and define narratives in peace discourse. By analyzing how the Azerbaijani government and civil society articulate fundamentally different visions of peace and how the government attempts to restrict and control alternative narratives as well, this study reveals the power dynamics embedded in linguistic choices, the confrontation in liberal and illiberal peace, and the implications for sustainable conflict transformation.

The research problem centers on narratives of peace following Azerbaijan's military victory in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, which has introduced a new era of discursive contestation between the government and civil society. While the government frames peace primarily in terms of territorial control and national security through the lens of winner's peace (Davtyan, 2025), civil society actors promote alternative conceptions centered on reconciliation and justice (Şentürk, 2025). This contradictory dichotomy raises critical questions about whose vision of peace becomes legitimized and how illiberal strategies serve to include or exclude certain perspectives within both domestic and international spheres.

The study addresses three core research questions: First, how do state and non-state actors employ specific discourse strategies and narrative structures to construct their versions of peace? Second, what power relations are revealed through the dominance or marginalization of particular peace discourses? Lastly, how do these contradictory narratives diverge and converge, and is there potential for common understanding among them?

2.2 Justification of Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and semi-structured interviews, selected for their capacity to reveal the complex, power-laden ways in which discourses of peace, victory, and legitimacy are constructed in post-war Azerbaijan. Given the politically sensitive nature of the topic and the constraints on civil society in Azerbaijan, a qualitative approach provides the necessary interpretive depth to examine both open and subtle mechanisms of meaning-making, particularly where open dissent or quantitative transparency may be limited or unsafe (Silverman, 2016).

Critical Discourse Analysis, informed primarily by Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional framework, serves as the central analytical tool for exploring how language reproduces, challenges, or reshapes power relations within public narratives. CDA views discourse not only as reflective of social reality, but as constitutive of it, shaping perceptions, legitimizing political actions, and embedding ideological assumptions into everyday communication (Fairclough, 2013; van Dijk, 1993).

In this study, CDA is applied to a carefully curated set of official texts, including presidential and official speeches, Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements, and national policy documents on post-war reconstruction and regional security. These texts are analyzed for their use of linguistic features such as modality such as expressions of certainty or obligation, presupposition and supposed truth, and intertextuality where there are references to historical or international discourses (Wodak, 2015). These features of discourse together work to construct a coherent narrative of state authority, national unity, and justified victory as well as a more illiberal vision of peace.

At the same time, the study examines civil society discourse through a selection of NGO reports, independent media publications, and existing transcripts from peacebuilding roundtable discussions. These texts often articulate alternative understandings of peace, memory, and justice—frequently in cautious or coded language due to the repressive civic environment (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2019). CDA enables the researcher to identify discursive strategies of resistance, accommodation, or ambivalence, highlighting how civil society actors position themselves relative to dominant state narratives. For instance, attention is given to how concepts like “reconciliation” are framed in civil society texts—often with greater emphasis on inclusivity

and transitional justice, in contrast to state narratives that prioritize sovereignty and territorial integrity (Şentürk, 2025; Davtyan, 2025).

In addition to formal texts and interviews, the study also analyzes social media posts and comment threads from platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram, which serve as increasingly important arenas for the expression of public sentiment, alternative narratives, and unofficial discourses. These digital spaces, though subject to surveillance and moderation, offer valuable insights into how state narratives are received, contested, or rearticulated by ordinary users and civil society actors operating in semi-anonymous settings (Maly, 2018). Posts and comments are selected using purposive sampling around key events, such as summits, presidential speeches, or public commemorations, and are examined for discursive markers including irony, emotive language, repetition, and hashtags, which often signal alignment or dissent. Ethical considerations, including user anonymity and data sensitivity, are strictly observed, and only publicly available content is included in the analysis.

To deepen the analysis and bring in individual perspectives that may not be fully captured in public texts, the study incorporates semi-structured interviews with 12 civil society representatives, including peace educators, human rights activists, journalists, and conflict resolution practitioners. Interviews are particularly valuable in revealing subjective interpretations and lived experiences, especially in settings where formal discourse may be tightly controlled (Brinkmann, 2013). The semi-structured format allows for flexibility to explore emergent themes while maintaining consistency across participants. Informed consent and strict confidentiality protocols are followed throughout, in recognition of the risks associated with political speech in Azerbaijan (Freedom House, 2024).

This dual-method approach is methodologically coherent and contextually justified. CDA offers a text-centered, power-sensitive lens that is well suited to unpack the ideological underpinnings of state discourse (van Dijk, 2008), while semi-structured interviews provide a grounded, actor-centered perspective that captures how individuals within civil society interpret, challenge, or internalize those discourses in practice. Together, these methods allow the study to move between the macro-level of institutional narrative and the micro-level of personal meaning-making,

revealing both the hegemonic logics of official communication and the counter-discourses that circulate, often quietly, within civil society (Wodak, 2015).

Moreover, this qualitative methodology aligns with a constructivist epistemology, which understands knowledge and meaning as socially constructed rather than objectively fixed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Rather than aiming for generalizability or quantification, the research seeks to understand how meaning is produced, negotiated, and contested in specific historical and political contexts. This is especially important in conflict-affected societies, where dominant narratives often obscure or marginalize alternative voices.

In sum, the chosen methodology ensures a rich, context-sensitive, and ethically responsible investigation of discourse in post-war Azerbaijan. By focusing on language as a site of struggle over legitimacy and memory, and by giving voice to civil society actors operating under constraint, the study contributes both theoretically and empirically to our understanding of narrative power in contested political settings.

2.3 Limitations and Ethical Protocols

The study acknowledges several methodological limitations in researching sensitive political topics in restrictive environments. The potential bias in state-produced texts is mitigated through triangulation with alternative sources and critical reading strategies. Constraints on civil society expression necessitate careful ethical protocols, including secure communication channels and anonymization of sensitive data. Researcher positionality as an external analyst is continuously reflected upon through memo-writing and peer consultation. While the study makes no claims to statistical representativeness, its qualitative depth and methodological pluralism offer insights into discursive dynamics that purely quantitative approaches might miss.

Ethical considerations permeate every stage of research design and implementation. Interview participants provide informed consent with clear explanations of data usage and publication boundaries. All identifiable information is anonymized, and participants retain the right to review quotations.

Another key ethical consideration is maintaining objectivity and critical distance, particularly given my positionality as an Azerbaijani researcher. Being from the country under study offers

valuable contextual understanding and cultural fluency but also carries the risk of bias, especially in a conflict-laden and politically sensitive topic like peace narratives. To mitigate this, I have actively engaged in adhering to transparency in methodology and interpretation. By critically examining both governmental and civil society discourses, I aim to contribute to a balanced and honest scholarly conversation about peacebuilding in Azerbaijan.

The theoretical and empirical contributions of this research design are three-leveled. Methodologically, it demonstrates how integrated discourse analysis can illuminate power dynamics in post-conflict settings where official narratives dominate public space. Empirically, it generates new knowledge about peace discourses in Azerbaijan that have received scant scholarly attention despite their regional significance. Theoretically, it advances understanding of how liberal peacebuilding models are appropriated, resisted, or transformed in hybrid political contexts, with particular relevance for studies of post-Soviet conflict resolution. By systematically comparing official and alternative peace narratives, the study provides a replicable model for analyzing discursive contests in other conflict-affected societies facing similar tensions between state-centric and society-centered visions of peace.

Analysis

The case of Azerbaijan

The post-war trajectory of Azerbaijan following its military victory in the 2020 Second Karabakh War and the subsequent full restoration of territorial control in 2023 presents a compelling case study for examining the theoretical frameworks of peace discussed in this thesis. The Azerbaijani context offers a unique lens through which to analyze the dynamics of illiberal peace, winner's peace, and liberal peacebuilding, as well as the tensions between state-imposed narratives and civil society alternatives.

Azerbaijan's post-conflict governance aligns closely with the illiberal peace framework, particularly the concept of "winner's peace." The Azerbaijani state, having achieved a decisive military victory, has framed peace primarily through the lens of territorial integrity, national sovereignty, and state-controlled stability rather than through negotiated compromise or reconciliation with Armenia (Davtyan, 2025). This approach reflects the "thick illiberal peace" model (Smith et al., 2020), where peace is imposed unilaterally, emphasizing regime security and elite consolidation of power over democratic inclusivity. The government has constructed a hegemonic discourse framing the conflict's resolution as a restoration of historical justice and a definitive victory, marginalizing alternative interpretations (Krivosheev, 2023). Independent civil society actors advocating for dialogue, transitional justice, or historical reconciliation face legal restrictions, censorship, and political marginalization (Aliyev, 2023), reinforcing the authoritarian nature of post-war governance.

Azerbaijan's case also engages with critiques of liberal peacebuilding, particularly its limitations in authoritarian contexts. While international organizations and Western actors have historically promoted liberal peace models—emphasizing democratization, human rights, and civil society engagement—Azerbaijan's government has resisted such frameworks, instead consolidating an illiberal post-war order (Lewis, 2020). This dynamic illustrates the failure of liberal peacebuilding in non-democratic states, where participation in international institutions (e.g., the EU's Eastern Partnership) has not led to meaningful democratic reforms (Carothers, 2015). The state's co-optation of civil society through government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) further demonstrates how regime-friendly narratives dominate, while independent peacebuilders are sidelined (Aliyev,

2023). Additionally, despite Western efforts to facilitate Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations, the peace process remains elite-driven and exclusionary, lacking grassroots participation (Caspersen, 2017).

Despite state repression, Azerbaijani civil society actors—including human rights defenders, intellectuals, and diaspora groups—continue to advocate for liberal and emancipatory peace models. Their visions emphasize historical dialogue and reconciliation with Armenians (Lederach, 1999), transitional justice to address war crimes and displacement (Sikkink, 2011), and grassroots peacebuilding through people-to-people initiatives (Mac Ginty, 2014). However, these actors operate under severe constraints, illustrating Richmond’s (2012) argument that emancipatory peace is often suppressed in authoritarian settings. The Azerbaijani case thus highlights the asymmetrical power dynamics between state narratives and marginalized civil society discourses.

Applying Nina Caspersen’s (2017) analysis of peace agreements to Azerbaijan reveals why a sustainable negotiated peace remains elusive. First, power asymmetry has led to a "winner’s peace", where the stronger party dictates terms rather than seeking compromise (Caspersen, 2017). Second, the government’s peace narrative enjoys elite legitimacy but lacks popular inclusivity, particularly among displaced Armenians and critical Azerbaijani voices (Beetham, 1991). Third, without strong third-party guarantees (e.g., robust international peacekeeping), the risk of renewed tensions persists (Walter, 2002). Finally, spoiler dynamics—hardliners in both Azerbaijan and Armenia resisting concessions—undermine diplomatic progress (Stedman, 1997).

Azerbaijan’s post-war experience is theoretically significant because it exemplifies illiberal peacebuilding in practice, contrasting with liberal peace models. It demonstrates how military victory shapes post-conflict narratives, reinforcing authoritarian control, while highlighting the marginalization of civil society in peace processes. Additionally, it provides a comparative perspective alongside cases like Sri Lanka and Chechnya, where military victories also led to illiberal peace (Russell, 2014; Walton & Thiyagaraja, 2020). By examining Azerbaijan through these theoretical lenses, this thesis contributes to broader debates on how peace is constructed in authoritarian regimes, the limits of liberal peacebuilding, and the long-term stability of “winner’s peace” models.

Competing Discourses of Peace in Post-War Azerbaijan

The next chapters of this thesis provide a systemic analysis of how competing visions of peace have been articulated in Azerbaijan's post-war political landscape following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Building on the theoretical framework established in Chapter 1 and the methodological approach outlined in Chapter 2, the analysis addresses three fundamental research questions of the thesis: how state and civil society actors employ distinct linguistic strategies to construct their versions of peace; what power relations are revealed through the dominance or marginalization of particular peace discourses; to what extent there is a viable space for collaboration between government and civil society.

Based on these three questions, the analysis is structured as follows. First, the third chapter explores the government's securitized peace narrative, which mainly frames the post-war settlement primarily in terms of military victory, territorial control, and the elimination of potential threats through means of illiberal peace. (Buzan et al., 1991; Lewis et al., 2018). This dominant discourse is characterized by the narrative construction through presidential addresses, state-controlled media, and official policy documents. Such narrative constructs a particular version of reality where peace is synonymous with Azerbaijani sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security. Any alternative or challenges to this narrative are positioned as threats to national security (Kamilsoy, 2023). The chapter analyzes how this approach not only solidifies the authority of government but also marginalizes alternative perspectives on peace.

In the next chapter, the focus of the analysis turns to civil society's liberal and emancipatory counter-narratives. These narratives attempt to articulate alternative conceptualizations of peace that are grounded in reconciliation, justice, and human rights (Lederach, 2005). Although these discourses are marginalized within the broader political atmosphere, they reveal the possibilities for resistance and highlight the role of civil society in advocating for more inclusive and just interpretations of peace in the broader narrative within constrained political environments. The chapter also analyzes the challenges that civil society experiences in constructing an alternative or parallel version of peace in Azerbaijan.

Finally, the last chapter critically investigates the divergences and convergences between these two contradicting approaches. It attempts to evaluate and explore whether there are opportunities

for collaboration between government and civil society in the context of current tensions and restrictions. The chapter also explores in which areas it is reasonable and predictable to foster these collaborations and a common space for working together.

The significance of this analysis extends beyond the specific case of Azerbaijan. By examining how language is weaponized in post-conflict settings to sustain particular power structures, the chapters contribute to broader debates about the relationship between discourse, peacebuilding, and authoritarian resilience. The findings have important implications for understanding how victor's peace narratives become institutionalized, how resistance is articulated under illiberal regimes, and what these dynamics mean for the prospects of sustainable conflict transformation in the South Caucasus and beyond.

3. Government's Perspective

3.1 The State's Illiberal Peace Discourse

The Azerbaijani government's construction of post-war peace represents a paradigmatic case of illiberal peacebuilding. Rather than focusing on creating an environment prepared for reconciliation, stability is enforced by an illiberal way of peace through discursive strategies that reinforce state authority over the narratives and marginalization of alternative voices. Drawing on the theoretical framework of illiberal peace (Lewis et al., 2018; Mitchell, 2024; Owen et al., 2018), this section analyzes how the state's discourse effectively constructs a binary between the victor and the defeated, utilizing a rhetoric that portrays Azerbaijan's military success as a restoration of historical rights. This kind of narrative is exacerbated by a comprehensive selection and interpretation of historical events, aiming to create a cohesive national identity based on the state's vision.

Through close examination of presidential speeches, state media, and policy documents, three interconnected discursive strategies emerge as central to this construction. These strategies, namely securitization, historical legitimation, and the systematic exclusion of alternative narratives, work in tandem to re-ensure the government's vision of peace. Each strategy will be examined in detail in the next sections of the chapter, offering deeper insights in the context of how means of illiberal peace are utilized by the Azerbaijani government.

Moreover, these strategies are also utilized differently in local and broader contexts, revealing a strategic duality in the government's approach. In the local sphere, the Azerbaijani government creates a narrative that highlights a sense of collective national identity, historical grievances, and revenge as well as resilience in the face of injustice. This approach is designed to gain public support from everyday people and also to weaken the dissenting narratives in the country. In contrast, in relations to Armenia and Armenians, the discourse often shifts towards an assertion of superiority and entitlement, where Azerbaijan is the mercy-giver. Additionally, the narrative portrays Armenians as continual aggressors, justifying the war and current narratives on peace as necessary for national security and territorial integrity.

A critical aspect of this strategic duality lies in the targeted audience for these messages. For instance, in a national address, President Ilham Aliyev utilized a direct language, specifically the

phrase "We chased them away like dogs" (Aliyev, 2020), to convey a potent sense of collective justice and national pride to his domestic audience. This language is particularly resonant within the local context, where the emotional weight of historical grievances fuels support for the government's narrative.

However, this rhetoric shifts significantly when adjusted for international audiences, as demonstrated during Aliyev's interview with the BBC (Aliyev, 2020). In this setting, he sought to clarify that his inflammatory language referred specifically to "Armenian forces," rather than implicating the Armenian people at large. This distinction highlights the government's awareness of the international perception of its narrative and the need to maintain a diplomatic façade that is palatable to foreign audiences. By emphasizing a nuanced differentiation between the military and civilian populations, the Azerbaijani leadership attempts to mitigate potential backlash from international communities that may view such language as incendiary or inflammatory.

This strategic modulation illustrates not only the importance of context in political communication but also the ways in which discourse around conflict and peace is influenced by audience considerations. Such a complex manipulation of language, framing, and narrative strategy reveals the underlying tensions inherent in the Azerbaijani government's approach to both domestic and international relations. The ability to adapt messaging in accordance with varying audiences underlines the significance of perception management in contemporary geopolitical conflicts, ultimately reflecting broader themes of identity, power, and the quest for legitimacy on both national and international stages.

3.2 Winner's peace

The securitization of peace in official discourse presents a complex interplay of violence, territoriality, and the pursuit of national identity in the case of Azerbaijan. This process manifests itself particularly in the post-war context, where the framing of peace is closely related to an order primarily concerning military victory and territorial control (Kappler, 2017). The rhetoric over the militarization of peace also reflects a broader trend in state communication, where the normalization of violence lies in the language of national achievement and historical rectification.

President Aliyev's Victory Day speech on November 8, 2021 exemplifies this trend, declaring "We restored historical justice through iron and blood" (Aliyev, 2021), also the same narrative at the opening of Military Trophy Park in Baku on April 12, 2021, saying "We have restored historical justice in battle, through fighting and shedding blood" (Aliyev, 2021). This kind of statement not only underscores a militaristic approach to the conflict but also dangerously reinforces that peace can only be restored through violent means. Normalization of armed conflicts to achieve long-term peace and stability also allows the government to use the same rhetoric on various topics in the same framework.

The discourse analysis of presidential speeches right after the Second Karabakh War reveals a disparity between the lexicon of peace and security. (Ismayılzada, 2021; Şeşen, Ünalın, & Dođan, 2022). The lexeme "security" and "national interest" appear approximately three times more frequently compared to the words "peace" or "reconciliation". This indicates a significant prioritization of a winner-centered approach to peace where security dictates the narrative over transformative conflict resolution. The choice of language indicates a broader discourse where the state is the protector against the security threats, therefore leaving no space for local alternatives to raise their voice, as well as the opposite party opting for dialogue or balanced negotiation.

In the center of this discourse is also the use of absolute modality, as seen in the recurring proclamation that "Azerbaijan's territorial integrity is non-negotiable" (Aliyev, 2011; MFA Statement, 2023). Such proclamations serve to prevent the discussion of compromise, automatically delegitimizing alternative perspectives and undermining the potential for peaceful negotiations. Despite the fact that the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan has been recognized by the international community by United Nations Security Council resolutions (United Nations Security Council, 1993, Resolutions 822, 853, 874, & 884), the insistence on non-negotiable terms creates a smaller and narrower space for the peaceful settlement of the conflict.

Additionally, the employment of spatial metaphors, such as "liberated lands" and "return to sacred territories" (Aliyev, 2021; 2022), re-imposes the zero-sum understanding of the conflict. These metaphors evoke a religious or historical justification of the war, portraying the conflict as an existential struggle for survival. This framing also effectively erases the possibility of shared

narratives between the conflicting sides, leaving the Armenian perspective totally excluded from the peace process in an imbalanced way.

In a striking example of this narrative, the president's remarks during an interview with the BBC encapsulate the implications of a so-called "winner's peace." He asserts, "I keep my words that after we liberate the territory from these criminal gangs which occupied our territory, Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh will live much better. They will have more salaries, because the salaries in Azerbaijan are higher. More pensions, because pensions in Azerbaijan are three times higher than in Armenia. They will have all the social protection. We will invest in those areas largely. They will get rid of poverty." (Aliyev, 2020) This statement not only reflects a paternalistic tone—that prosperity is a gift bestowed by the victor—but also underscores a problematic dichotomy whereby the state's developmental agenda is positioned as a form of goodwill extended to a vanquished populace.

3.3 Historical legitimation

Historical legitimation plays a crucial role in the state narrative of Azerbaijan. This narrative constructs a direct link between medieval Turkic states and the contemporary Azerbaijani nation, indicating that the region constitutes an "ancestral homeland." Such statements are in official documents, explicitly recognizing Nagorno-Karabakh as an "inalienable part of Azerbaijan's historical and cultural heritage," signifying a deliberate state effort to connect the present circumstances to a historical context.

The historical foundations cited by the Azerbaijani government draw upon notable medieval Turkic kingdoms, notably the Atabegs of Azerbaijan and the Karabakh Khanate, which existed between the 18th and 19th centuries. By referencing these historical entities, the government seeks to establish a perceived continuity of Azerbaijani Turkic presence in the region, thus reinforcing its connections to Nagorno-Karabakh (Swietochowski, 1991).

Contrasting viewpoints, however, highlight the selective nature of this historical narrative, emphasizing that it often downplays the rich and complex demographic history of Nagorno-Karabakh, particularly the significant Armenian cultural and political influence in the region (de

Waal, 2013). Critics argue that the official Azerbaijani narrative neglects the essential elements of this history, which challenges the assertions of a singular Azerbaijani cultural dominion over the area (Mozaffari & Barry, 2023)

Moreover, Azerbaijani scholars respond to these critiques by asserting that Armenian political entities in Karabakh were ultimately subordinate to larger Turkic and Persian states, reinforcing the legitimacy of Azerbaijan's historical claims through a lens that emphasizes hierarchical power structures in historical governance (Valiyev, 2020). This discourse reinforces historical narratives to present a monolithic perspective that favors one cultural lineage over another, thereby framing Azerbaijani sovereignty as a natural consequence of historical precedence.

The rhetorical strategies employed in Azerbaijan's discourse further solidify this narrative of historical continuity. Terms such as "ancestral lands" and expressions like "restoration of territorial integrity" recur in official statements, inferring a historical argument that enshrines Azerbaijani authority over the region as both an inherited right and a corrective necessity following perceived disruptions to territorial sovereignty (Aliyev, 2020). This rhetoric, especially prominent after the 2020 war, positions the Armenian presence as a temporary aberration rather than a historical claim.

The historical legitimation of Azerbaijan's claims to Nagorno-Karabakh remains a site of intense contestation. Competing narratives reflect broader geopolitical dynamics and identity-based tensions that characterize the South Caucasus region. As the struggle for historical legitimacy evolves, it continues to influence both domestic identities within Azerbaijan and international perceptions of the ongoing conflict, ultimately shaping the broader discourse surrounding national sovereignty and cultural heritage in the area.

3.4 Exclusion of pluralism

The exclusion of pluralism in the state's peace discourse represents a critical and politically significant dimension that affects the trajectory of conflict resolution and societal dynamics. This dimension reveals itself through the systematic marginalization of dissenting voices, a process that employs a dual strategy encompassing both delegitimation and legal repression. Such mechanisms are clearly articulated in the state's response to civil society organizations advocating for dialogue,

which are frequently denounced in state media as “traitors” and “foreign agents.” (Eurasianet, 2023) A pertinent illustration of this can be found in the backlash against the Baku Dialogue Initiative following its 2022 proposal for Armenian-Azerbaijani people-to-people exchanges, where state media outlets like AzTV actively participated in a smear campaign aimed at discrediting these initiatives (AzTV, 2022).

One participant in the study articulated the considerable challenges confronting peacebuilders in contemporary contexts, particularly emphasizing issues related to censorship, the diminishing of civic spaces, and the erosion of public trust, which is often exacerbated by nationalist rhetoric. This participant noted that such conditions engender an environment where peacebuilding efforts are frequently mischaracterized. Practitioners within this field often find themselves labeled as "traitors" or accused of serving as foreign agents. This negative framing not only undermines their legitimacy but also fosters an emotionally and psychologically charged atmosphere that affects those engaged in dialogue and conflict resolution. The politicization and widespread misunderstanding of peacebuilding initiatives complicate efforts to cultivate constructive dialogue, thereby entrenching existing societal divisions.

Another interviewee remarked on the government's promotion of a narrative centered around strength, victory, and unity. This narrative effectively consolidates national pride and control; however, it carries a significant limitation: the suppression of pluralism. Such a stance leaves inadequate space for mourning, empathy for others, or discussions regarding past traumas affecting both sides of the conflict. This lack of inclusivity in the narrative further complicates the potential for meaningful engagement and reconciliation within the affected communities.

This type of discursive violence is reinforced by legal frameworks that further entrench state control over civil society. For instance, the 2014 amendments to the NGO Law have severely curtailed the ability of non-governmental organizations to receive foreign funding, effectively suffocating independent voices that do not align with state narratives (OSCE/ODIHR, 2022). Additionally, the introduction of the 2022 Law on Media has equipped authorities with the legal tools to censor any information deemed "false" regarding territorial integrity, allowing for broad interpretations that can silence dissenting views under the veil of national security (HRW, 2023). This legal repression creates a landscape in which only state-sanctioned narratives are permitted

to circulate, thereby constituting what Foucault (1977) refers to as a "regime of truth." In such a regime, the parameters of acceptable discourse are constrained, leading to a mono-narrative representation of peace that excludes critical perspectives.

In accordance with Decree No. 1317, issued by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on April 19, 2021, the "Agency for State Support to Non-Governmental Organizations of the Republic of Azerbaijan" was established. This agency arose from the Council for State Support to Non-Governmental Organizations and operates as a public legal entity aimed at fostering the development of NGOs. Its functions include enhancing cooperation between public, private, and non-governmental sectors, evaluating initiatives and projects proposed by NGOs on matters pertinent to state and societal interests, and facilitating international collaboration among NGOs.

However, this structure appears to impact the independence of NGOs adversely, suggesting a trend towards increased state control. The establishment of the Agency raises critical concerns about the government's intent to regulate and oversee non-governmental activities, further entrenching its control over civil society and limiting the diversity of voices and perspectives within that space.

The impact of this discursive strategy is particularly salient in educational contexts, where the state's narrative is institutionalized through revised history textbooks. These educational materials typically portray the conflict solely through the lens of Azerbaijani victimhood and eventual triumph (Akhundov, 2025; Ghazaryan & Huseynli, 2022), thereby omitting any acknowledgment of Armenian perspectives or historical complexities. This strategy not only solidifies the state's narrative but also perpetuates a binary understanding of the conflict that simplifies the historical truths and inhibits the capacity for critical reflection among future generations.

This tripartite discursive approach, comprised of securitization, historical legitimation, and exclusion of pluralism, embodies what Mac Ginty and Richmond (2016) characterize as the hallmark of illiberal peacebuilding. They argue that such frameworks leverage coercive means to establish stability at the expense of participatory elements that are crucial for sustainable conflict resolution. In the Azerbaijani context, the intertwining of symbolic power and physical coercion underscores a hegemonic narrative that conflates peace with state dominance, rather than fostering an environment of mutual recognition or justice.

This concentration on state-centric narratives underscores a broader pattern observed in conflict-affected societies, where the governance of memory and identity is often utilized as a tool for consolidating power (Brounéus, 2008). The manipulation of historical narratives serves to construct a cohesive national identity that may marginalize or exclude alternate viewpoints, thereby reinforcing existing divisions rather than healing them (Baker, 2010). Research indicates that inclusive dialogues that acknowledge diverse perspectives can facilitate more sustainable conflict resolution (Fisher, 2000), asserting the necessity of pluralism in peacebuilding efforts.

4. Civil Society's Counter-Discursive Role

In the post-war context of Azerbaijan, a nation grappling with the complexities of identity, statehood, and geopolitical dynamics, civil society actors have emerged as potential contradictory agents of discourse. Their efforts represent profound and nuanced attempts to confront and subvert the state's predominant narrative, which frames peace predominantly in terms of military victory and territorial consolidation. This hegemonic narrative, deeply rooted in the national consciousness and often employed by political elites to legitimize their authority, is increasingly challenged by a wide array of civil society organizations through a diverse set of discursive strategies.

These counter-discourses are primarily articulated through various mediums, including NGO reports, independent media platforms, and transnational advocacy networks. Such channels facilitate the construction of an alternative conceptualization of peace—one that is informed by principles such as dialogue, justice, and mutual recognition, as articulated by conflict resolution scholar John Paul Lederach (2005). This reimagining of peace serves not only as a critique of the state's militarized approach but also as a call for a more inclusive understanding of human experiences in the aftermath of conflict.

However, the landscape for civil society's peacebuilding efforts is fraught with challenges due to the oppressive conditions that activists often encounter. Following the war in Azerbaijan, despite the acknowledged importance of civil society in peace efforts, a troubling trend has emerged characterized by the suppression of independent voices. High-profile instances of civil society activists, including peacebuilders who champion human rights, being arrested underscore a concerning trend that further constricts the already limited scope of civil society engagement. Reports indicate that such arrests are not mere isolated incidents but rather part of a broader strategy to silence dissent and limit the space for effective peacebuilding in the country.

Moreover, qualitative data gathered through interviews for this research offers a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between civil society and governmental forces, as well as intra-civil society dynamics. A particularly salient finding is the division within civil society itself, where some members vocally oppose governmental actions and policies, while others exhibit a degree of alignment or tacit consent regarding the government's narrative in relation to peace initiatives. This dichotomy suggests that the landscape of civil society is not monolithic but rather

characterized by a diversity of perspectives and strategies in addressing the challenges of peacebuilding.

Interviewees commonly recognized that the space for peacebuilding was ostensibly broader immediately following the war, contrasting sharply with the environment observed post-2023. This downturn in the civil society landscape can be attributed to intensified governmental measures aimed at controlling public discourse, including increased pressures that manifest through imprisonment and other forms of repression. Such actions not only stifle individual voices but also create an atmosphere of fear and mistrust that undermines collective efforts toward reconciliation and peace.

Thus, while counter-discourses on peacebuilding offer crucial insights into alternative frameworks, the realities faced by civil society actors in Azerbaijan reveal a troubling paradox: the potential for dialogue and justice exists, yet it is continually thwarted by systemic efforts to marginalize those who advocate for such ideals. This tension between aspiration and repression underscores the need for sustained international attention and support for civil society movements, emphasizing the critical role they play in shaping a more just and peaceful society.

4.1 Reconceptualization of Peace

A fundamental challenge posed by civil society is the reconceptualization of the very notion of peace itself. While the state's narrative privileges concepts of security and sovereignty, often at the expense of social cohesion, organizations like the Baku Human Rights Club strive to present an alternative vision. Their 2024 report, Human Rights Watch, encapsulates this shift. It posits that genuine peace necessitates the acknowledgment of suffering across all affected communities and emphasizes the creation of spaces conducive to dialogue (Human Rights Watch, 2024). This assertion directly undermines the state's prevailing, victory-centric framework and suggests that a more profound, transformative peace hinges on practices of acknowledgment and reconciliation rather than military success.

One respondent currently residing abroad articulated a nuanced perspective on peace, emphasizing the significance of engaging with youth to foster a constructive peace framework. She identified

her work as instrumental in combating hate speech, dehumanization, and systemic exclusion by employing methodologies such as storytelling, dialogue, and human rights education. This approach highlights the complexity of peacebuilding efforts, particularly in light of the diminishing public space for meaningful discourse. Despite these challenges, she asserts the necessity of such initiatives in promoting positive peace and social cohesion.

A linguistic analysis of these alternative framings reveals a significant strategic differentiation between civil society and the state. Civil society actors often employ tentative modality in their discourse, utilizing phrases such as “might help,” “could facilitate,” and “potential avenues.” This choice of language contrasts with the absolute certainty that characterizes state discourse, which often manifests itself in unequivocal assertions of security and triumph. The reliance on tentative language reflects a dual consciousness within civil society: it not only embodies an epistemological openness to multiple perspectives and solutions but also serves a tactical purpose. By avoiding direct confrontations with state authorities, these organizations navigate the fraught political landscape with greater agility, preserving their legitimacy while advocating for change.

The online platform Meydan TV exemplifies this careful balancing act in its coverage of peace-related issues. By promoting concepts of “people-centered reconciliation,” the platform highlights the importance of community engagement in the peacebuilding process without overtly challenging the state’s authority or sovereignty (Meydan TV, 2023). This approach underscores the significant role of independent media as a space for dialogue, where alternative narratives can emerge and reach a broader audience, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of peace efforts.

The interviews conducted with members of civil society provide a multifaceted perspective on the concept of peace within the context of Azerbaijani society. A significant theme that emerged from these discussions is the coexistence of various narratives regarding peace, highlighting how divergent views can coexist even within a single community. The majority of interviewees leaned toward liberal interpretations of peace, which often emphasize democratic principles, human rights, and individual freedoms. This inclination suggests a widespread aspiration for not just the cessation of hostilities but the establishment of a society characterized by egalitarian values and justice.

However, the presence of dissenting voices within the interviews underscores the complexity of defining peace in the current sociopolitical environment of Azerbaijan. Some interviewees posited a more pragmatic and perhaps instrumental approach, asserting that the government's actions and perspectives represent the most realistic stance under prevailing circumstances. This perspective raises important questions about the role of governmental authority and its influence on the peacebuilding process. The differing views suggest a potential disconnect between civil society aspirations and state objectives, illustrating the challenges inherent in negotiating peace in environments marked by political tension and historical grievances.

One particularly insightful comment from an interviewee emphasized that the concept of "peace" remains undefinable until a formal peace treaty is signed and a comprehensive framework is established. This highlights the critical interplay between formal agreements and the lived realities of individuals within civil society. For peace to be genuinely realized, there needs to be not only a legal document but also a shared understanding and commitment to build a sustainable framework for future interactions. Within this framework, civil society can play a pivotal role in shaping, navigating, and contributing to the peace process, thereby bridging the gap between top-down peace agreements and grassroots realities.

Moreover, an interesting critique emerged targeting the liberal peacebuilding community, with one interviewee arguing that this community often prioritizes theoretical concepts over practical accessibility. This critique raises important methodological considerations for peacebuilding efforts: while liberal frameworks provide valuable insights, their detachment from the everyday experiences of individuals can render them inaccessible. The emphasis on theoretical constructs may alienate those who do not resonate with abstract principles or who find them difficult to apply in their daily lives. The call for a shift in focus toward themes such as collective memory, the influence of social media, issues of gender, environmental concerns, experiences of bullying, and the concept of inner peace suggests a more inclusive approach to peacebuilding.

The interplay between state narratives and civil society discourses in Azerbaijan highlights the crucial role of language and framing in shaping societal perceptions of peace. The strategies employed by civil society actors illustrate their resilience and adaptability in the face of political constraints, emphasizing the importance of dialogue and recognition in the quest for sustainable

peace. As these organizations continue to challenge entrenched narratives, they not only enrich the public discourse surrounding peace but also lay the groundwork for transformative approaches that prioritize healing, coexistence, and collective progress beyond the immediate post-war context.

4.2 Documentation and Transnational Advocacy

Civil society's documentation of state repression emerges as a pivotal element of counter-discourse, particularly in authoritarian regimes where state narratives often dominate. The Azerbaijan Peace Initiative's 2023 shadow report submitted to the UN Committee Against Torture serves as a critical case study reflecting this practice. The report uncovers multiple instances where activists advocating for Armenian-Azerbaijani dialogue have faced arrest and other forms of repression. By highlighting that "the criminalization of peace work undermines the possibility of genuine conflict transformation", the report elucidates a broader peril: the stifling of peacebuilding efforts under systemic oppression. This not only hampers individual activism but also poses a significant threat to the prospect of achieving sustainable peace in the region.

The articulation of these issues aligns with what Tarrow (2005) refers to as "accountability framing." This approach effectively connects specific human rights violations to wider patterns of illiberal governance, rendering state actions comprehensible within a broader systemic critique. By situating individual cases within this larger framework, civil society organizations not only document abuses but also advocate for accountability and reform, thereby engaging in a form of narrative warfare against state-sanctioned injustices.

Furthermore, transnational advocacy networks play a crucial role in equipping civil society with vital discursive resources that may not be accessible domestically. Organizations like the Baku Research Institute strategically frame their appeals using established international legal norms. Their 2023 petition to the UN Human Rights Council, which invokes the right to truth in post-conflict societies, serves as an illustrative example of this approach (BRI, 2023). This tactic reflects what Keck and Sikkink (1998) describe as a "boomerang pattern" of advocacy, wherein local activists circumvent governmental restrictions by engaging with international institutions and diasporic communities. This strategy not only enhances the visibility of their plight but also pressures state actors by drawing international attention to local abuses.

The effectiveness of this transnational discourse is underscored by the reactions it provokes within state media. The Azerbaijani government's response, as evidenced by AzTV's 2023 exposé on "NGOs betraying national interests in Geneva," demonstrates the perceived threat that such international engagements pose to the state's narrative legitimacy (AzTV, 2023). By characterizing these advocacy efforts as betrayals, the state inadvertently affirms the influence and power of transnational advocacy, revealing the extent to which civil society's efforts to document and counter state repression resonate beyond national boundaries.

The documentation and advocacy processes within Azerbaijani civil society reveal significant internal conflicts as well, as illustrated by interviews conducted. One participant articulated a significant point within civil society, stating, "There is a significant division in civil society in Azerbaijan." This assertion highlights a polarized environment characterized by a binary worldview: dissenting opinions are viewed not merely as differences but as outright opposition. The prevailing atmosphere is marked by radical anti-government sentiments and accusatory labelings such as "traitor" directed at those who diverge from dominant narratives. Such polarization not only compromises the inclusivity of civil discourse but also undermines the integrity and validity of reports produced by civil society organizations.

4.3 Challenges for Civil Society Discourse

The complexities inherent in counter-discourses within authoritarian regimes often reveal significant structural constraints that inhibit their potential for genuine impact and transformation. In the Azerbaijani context, the term "civil society" serves not only as a descriptor of non-state actors but also as a battleground for ideological contention. The state's active promotion of government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) exemplifies a strategic maneuver designed to co-opt the language of civil society for its own ends. These GONGOs effectively replicate the structure and rhetoric of independent civil society organizations, yet remain tethered to the state's objectives, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging dominant narratives (Aliyev, 2022).

In exploring the limitations imposed on civil society discourse, it is critical to acknowledge the constraints that interviewees have articulated regarding the language and permissions necessary for their endeavors. The necessity for explicit permissions, ranging from the approval of specific

terminology to the authorization for particular activities, serves to stifle the inherent creativity and outreach potential of civil society actors. This restriction is not merely logistical; it symbolizes a broader pattern of indirect coercion that permeates the civil landscape.

The role of external donors and international support mechanisms cannot be overlooked in this context. Although these entities often aim to bolster grassroots movements, the complex matrix of conditional funding and programmatic oversight may inadvertently reinforce the very dynamics they seek to disrupt. The conditionality attached to funding sources often leads to a prioritization of certain narratives that align with donor agendas, further constraining the scope and authenticity of civil society engagement.

Such dynamics are further exacerbated by legislative restrictions, prominently articulated in the 2014 NGO Law (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2024), which imposed severe limitations on funding sources for civil society organizations. As a result, many organizations have found themselves constrained to either curtail their peace-building initiatives or shift their operations underground, which poses significant risks to both their sustainability and their capacity to engage with broader societal issues (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023). This systemic repression fosters an environment where genuine discourse surrounding peace and reconciliation is not only stifled but rendered largely invisible within the public sphere.

Moreover, the challenge of effectively disseminating counter-discourses becomes acutely pronounced in a society deeply entrenched in a history of conflict socialization. Decades of state-sponsored narratives, coupled with recent military successes, have solidified a prevailing ethos that valorizes nationalism and military prowess over peaceful coexistence. This reflects the insights of Antonio Gramsci (1971), who articulated the formidable obstacles faced by counter-hegemonic movements in contexts characterized by the extensive ideological penetration of state narratives. In such environments, where state-propagated identities and ideologies dominate popular consciousness, the task of counter-discourses is not merely to propose alternative narratives but to engage in a protracted struggle for legitimacy and resonance within the collective imagination of society.

Thus, the interplay between state narratives and counter-discourses in Azerbaijan encapsulates a broader phenomenon observed in many post-Soviet societies, where the remnants of authoritarian

governance inhibit the emergence of vibrant, independent civil societies. This calls for a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which established power structures can absorb, distort, or extinguish dissenting voices, as well as an appreciation of the resilience and resourcefulness displayed by civil society actors operating under such constraints. In this context, it becomes crucial to support and amplify these counter-discourses, not only as acts of resistance but as essential components of a broader dialogue aimed at fostering a more democratic and peaceful societal framework.

Several interviewees have expressed critical reflections on how civil society operates and interacts with various societal sectors. One prominent concern is encapsulated in the assertion that civil society can become insular, effectively “living in a bubble.” This metaphor suggests a self-imposed segregation where civil society actors primarily engage with individuals and groups who share similar ideologies and perspectives. Such exclusivity can inhibit the broader engagement necessary for fostering diverse input and innovative solutions in peacebuilding efforts.

For instance, an interviewed participant pointed out that civil society organizations advocating for liberal peacebuilding often marginalize voices from nationalist groups. This exclusionary practice not only narrows the dialogue but also limits the potential for these organizations to address a wider array of societal sentiments and grievances. Engaging with a more diverse spectrum of stakeholders could enhance the quality and acceptance of peace initiatives by making them more reflective of the general populace’s views.

Moreover, there is an evident concern about stagnation within civil society. One interviewee remarked that “Lessons are not learned from old mistakes,” indicating that repetitive patterns of behavior and thought have emerged among practitioners in the field. Those involved in peace processes may become institutionalized, working within a restricted circle that perpetuates existing biases and hinders adaptive strategies. The references to nepotism and favoritism underscore a critical need to address internal power dynamics that can stifle inclusivity and innovation. When actors prioritize personal networks over broader societal engagement, the efficacy of civil society in driving meaningful change is inevitably compromised.

The inability of civil society to adequately reflect the voices of the communities they serve represents a broader systemic issue. The critique that civil society is “marginalized” and “not

creative enough” suggests an urgent requirement for introspection and reevaluation of methodologies employed within these organizations. Many voices remain unheard, including those of environmental activists, disabled persons, and the families of veterans and martyrs, indicating a significant gap in representation. Such omissions not only undermine the democratic principles that underpin civil society but also disenfranchise segments of the population that could contribute valuable perspectives to peacebuilding processes.

In contexts such as Azerbaijan, where nationalism and patriotism frequently dominate public discourse, the engagement of civil society in peace advocacy can sometimes become entangled with personal ambitions, leading to a situation where such efforts seem more aligned with career advancement than with a genuine commitment to fostering social change. This phenomenon highlights a critical disconnect between civil society organizations and the broader populace, suggesting that the civic engagement purportedly aimed at promoting peace may, in reality, lack authenticity.

Another responder has revealed that the interplay between personal ambitions and nationalistic sentiments can cultivate a perception that peace advocacy is motivated by self-interest rather than a true desire for societal improvement. This perception can alienate the public from civil society initiatives, undermining their effectiveness. The skepticism towards civil society is compounded by the reality that these organizations may be distanced from the urgent and often complicated issues faced by their communities. As a result, civil society operates in a realm that often feels detached from the lived experiences of the average citizen, creating a chasm between advocacy efforts and public sentiment.

An illustration of this disconnect occurred during the protests in Azerbaijan in July 2020, where demonstrators called for military action in response to clashes with Armenia (BBC News, 2020). Reports indicated that as many as 30000 individuals gathered for these protests, a noteworthy figure that underlines the immense public desire for a response framed in nationalistic terms. This situation contrasts with the civil society narrative promoting peace. When such significant segments of the populace openly express support for conflict rather than the peace-oriented rhetoric of civil society, it raises questions about the relevance of civil society organizations in an environment where nationalistic rhetoric and ambitions prevails.

Furthermore, the expression of enmity towards governmental structures, often present in civil society discourse, can obscure the underlying objectives of these organizations. When civil society is perceived through the lens of hostility towards the government, it may unintentionally reinforce skepticism among the very communities it aims to serve and reach. The challenge, therefore, lies in reconciling the dual roles of civil society as advocates for peace while also addressing the frustration and desires of the populace for assertive action in the face of perceived threats. This tension between advocacy and public sentiment necessitates a critical examination of how civil society can authentically engage with the realities of the community, ensuring that peace advocacy resonates on a level that reflects the genuine aspirations of the people it aims to represent.

5. Divergence and Convergence in Peace Narratives

The Azerbaijani government and civil society articulate fundamentally different visions of peace, reflecting broader tensions between state-centric security paradigms and grassroots reconciliation efforts. While the state constructs peace as a militarized, non-negotiable victory, civil society advocates for dialogue, pluralism, and justice. Yet, despite their ideological differences, these narratives occasionally intersect in unexpected ways, particularly in their shared emphasis on territorial integrity and selective appeals to international norms. This chapter examines the key points of divergence (where narratives clash) and convergence (where they overlap), revealing the complex dynamics shaping post-war discourse in Azerbaijan.

5.1 Divergence: Competing Visions of Peace

The divergence in definitions of peace highlights a broader ideological struggle between state and civil society paradigms within Azerbaijan. The government's conception of peace as synonymous with military victory and territorial control not only serves a propagandistic purpose but also facilitates a nationalistic agenda that seeks to unify the populace under a singular narrative of historical justice. This interpretation is rooted in a zero-sum framework, wherein the defeat of the enemy, portrayed as an eternal aggressor, becomes a foundational element of national identity. By framing peace in such a manner, the Azerbaijani government effectively legitimizes its military actions and territorial aspirations, ensuring that any discourse on peace is intertwined with a narrative of superiority and the inevitability of Azerbaijan's historical claims (Aliyev, 2021; 2022).

In contrast, civil society organizations (CSOs) embody a more nuanced approach to peace, emphasizing it not as a state of being determined by military dominance but as a dynamic and ongoing process of reconciliation. This conceptualization challenges the state's monolithic view by promoting the ideas of mutual recognition and coexistence, which are essential for sustainable conflict resolution (Lederach, 2005). The use of tentative language, such as "potential avenues for dialogue," by CSOs plays a critical role in fostering a discourse that allows for alternative solutions rather than rigidly adhering to the government's narratives. This nuanced understanding of peace acknowledges the complexities of human relations and the need for adaptive strategies that account for the diverse experiences and identities within the Azerbaijani landscape.

The treatment of historical narratives further illustrates the divide between state and civil society. The government's enforcement of a monolithic interpretation of history, which positions contemporary Azerbaijan as a direct descendant of medieval Turkic kingdoms, serves to legitimize its claims while simultaneously marginalizing Armenian historical narratives (Swietochowski, 1991; Mozaffari & Barry, 2023). This institutionalized discourse is perpetuated through various channels, such as education and state media, creating a binary that frames Azerbaijan as a victim and Armenia as an aggressor (Ghazaryan & Huseynli, 2022). By promoting a linear and exclusionary narrative, the state effectively stifles critical discourse and dissent regarding its policies and historical claims.

Finally, the treatment of dissent reveals the contrasting approaches of the state and civil society in managing alternative voices. The Azerbaijani government employs systematic repression mechanisms, utilizing legal frameworks and public vilification techniques to stifle dissent and maintain its authority (e.g., through restrictive NGO and media laws) (AzTV, 2022; HRW, 2023). This repression not only infringes upon civil liberties but also aims to monopolize the narrative surrounding national identity and historical truth.

In resistance, civil society has leveraged transnational networks and digital platforms, as noted by scholars like Keck and Sikkink (1998), to circumvent state-imposed censorship. This dynamic foregrounds the concept of a "regime of truth" as articulated by Foucault (1977), wherein the state monopolizes legitimate discourse, while dissenting voices utilize innovative strategies to disrupt and contest this narrative. The rise of digital activism and transnational solidarity networks in this context showcases the resilience of civil society as it seeks to forge alternative narratives that reflect the complexities of Azerbaijani history and society.

This divergence can be seen as a reflection of underlying power dynamics, where both entities assert contradictory views on various social sectors, including but not limited to gender, environmental concerns, and human rights. An insightful observation from one of the interviewees highlights a crucial aspect of this relationship: the government's primary objective appears to be the control of discourse across all dimensions of civil society engagement. This perspective suggests that the government perceives civil society not as an inherent adversary but rather as a potential ally, provided that civil society aligns its activities with the state's narratives and policies.

In this light, the notion of convergence emerges, wherein the government tacitly accepts the existence and functions of civil society entities as long as they do not challenge or undermine the prevailing mainstream narratives. This expectation creates a precarious environment for civil society organizations, compelling them to navigate a fine line between advocating for social justice and adhering to state-sanctioned messages. Thus, civil society's autonomy becomes increasingly compromised, leading to a constrained capacity to influence public discourse and policymaking effectively.

The question posed to the interviewees regarding the ways in which civil society's peace narratives either challenge or complement the state's discourse yielded a strikingly unanimous response of “no.” This outcome underscores the extent of divergence between these two entities. It suggests that civil society's role has significantly weakened in recent years, limiting its ability to engage in meaningful dialogue or to present alternative narratives that could serve to challenge state narratives. The lack of complementary narratives from civil society signifies not only a retreat in its ability to push for progressive change but also reflects a broader climate of suppression where dissenting voices are marginalized.

5.2 Convergence: Unexpected Overlaps

In examining the narratives of state and civil society regarding territorial integrity, one discovers a paradox: despite their open oppositional stances, both entities heavily invoke the principle of territorial integrity as an inviolable tenet. The government, for instance, strategically aligns itself with international legitimacy by referencing United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions established in 1993 to substantiate its stance on the matter. This invocation serves not only to assert sovereignty but also to frame its claims within a globally recognized legal context. Conversely, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), while frequently critical of state policies, exhibit a nuanced acknowledgment of Azerbaijan's sovereignty, albeit delivered with a cautious approach that emphasizes the necessity for dialogue and reconciliation (BRI, 2023). This interplay reveals a complex dynamic: in an environment charged with nationalist fervor, dissenting voices must navigate stringent boundaries set by the state, suggesting that even alternative discourses are co-opted within the parameters of nationalist ideology.

Moreover, the juxtaposition of narratives highlights a strategic deployment of international norms by both state and civil society actors. The state engages in a selective interpretation of international law, particularly by citing UNSC resolutions to reinforce its stance and, by extension, its authority. This practice positions the government as a legitimate actor within the international community, despite the contentious nature of its claims. On the other hand, CSOs mobilize human rights frameworks, invoking principles such as the "right to truth" to contest acts of state repression. This creates a scenario where both the state and civil society are entangled in what can be described as a "legitimation game"; each seeks to validate its own position, but with fundamentally contrasting aims. The state's objective revolves around consolidating authority and control over the narrative, while civil society's objective is to carve out and secure a public space for dissenting perspectives and discourse.

Another point of convergence is evident in the rhetoric surrounding victimhood and resilience, particularly through contrasting narratives by the state and CSOs. The Azerbaijani government underscores narratives of national suffering, prominently invoking historical traumatic events such as the Khojaly massacre. Slogans like "The world must recognize the Khojaly genocide," "Justice for Khojaly," "Do not forget Khojaly," and "No to Armenian fascism" (Aliyev, 2024) serve not merely as cries for recognition but also as justifications for a militaristic approach to peace. This strategic framing seeks to concretize the nationalist sentiment, positioning the state as both the protector and the promoter of Azerbaijani dignity in response to historical grievances.

In contrast, CSOs engage with these narratives through a lens focused on documenting abuses and advocating for restorative justice. Their efforts aim to cultivate a discourse rooted in empathy and reconciliation, thereby challenging the more confrontational state narrative (Ubuntu Sosial İş Dərnəyi, 2023). This dual appropriation of trauma illustrates the divergent ends to which both entities direct their respective narratives: while the state prioritizes mobilization rooted in nationalism, civil society advocates for a framework that facilitates healing and socio-political reconciliation.

Moreover, this duality becomes particularly pronounced in specific sociopolitical contexts. For instance, during the escalation of hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia in July 2020, a remarkable political alignment was evident when forty-three political parties signed a Joint

Statement in support of President Ilham Aliyev and the Azerbaijani Army (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2021). This unprecedented show of unity signifies a dramatic convergence point within the Azerbaijani political landscape, particularly pronounced during periods of national crisis. Following this, in September 2020, as war broke out in Karabakh, a staggering fifty out of the fifty-two registered political parties reiterated their support for the government and its military efforts (Azerbaijan24, 2020). Such overwhelming political solidarity illustrates not only the significance of national trauma for unity but also the challenges faced by opposition voices within a predominantly nationalistic framework.

The insights gathered from interviews with members of civil society regarding the potential for collaboration with the government in peacebuilding efforts reveal the realities of the current situation on the ground. When addressed with the question, “Do you see opportunities for collaboration between civil society and the government on peacebuilding, despite current tensions?”, only 5 out of the 12 interviewed participants responded positively. This statistic highlights a significant level of skepticism regarding the feasibility of such collaboration, likely influenced by the current political climate and heightened tensions between civil society and government entities.

The respondents who expressed optimism about potential collaboration emphasized that such efforts would likely be restricted to non-political and non-sensitive topics. This delineation indicates a clear understanding among civil society members of the boundaries that currently exist between governmental and civil societal engagements. The identified areas for cooperation predominantly revolve around general humanitarian issues, including but not limited to land delimitation and demarcation processes, landmine clearance initiatives, and environmental concerns. These issues, while crucial to community stability and wellbeing, are considered less contentious and politically charged, allowing an opportunity of collaboration to be fostered in a polarized environment.

The collaborative efforts among researchers focused on leopard conservation in the Caucasus region offer a positive approach for civil society members. Despite the controversies and hostilities posed by the 2020 war and subsequent conflicts, governmental entities have demonstrated the capacity to engage in cooperative initiatives through partnerships with organizations like the

World Wildlife Fund (WWF) on environmental issues (WWF, 2020). This collaboration not only highlights the potential for joint action amid challenging circumstances but also raises optimism that similar partnerships could be fostered in other critical areas, such as gender equality and the issues of bullying in schools. These areas remain within the Azerbaijani government's oversight and are reflected in its local policy agenda, suggesting a possible framework for future collaboration aimed at addressing pressing social challenges.

Moreover, the reference to forthcoming peace projects post-agreement indicates a significant shift in the potential for collaboration. Respondents express a belief that the formalization of peace through a signed agreement could pave the way for increased engagement from civil society, enabling them to participate actively in the implementation of peace-oriented initiatives. The statement underscores the governmental motivation to cultivate its narrative surrounding peace, which may ultimately serve to legitimize its authority and foster public trust. Furthermore, this dynamic could create a crucial platform for civil society to collaborate with their Armenian counterparts on non-political matters, potentially laying the groundwork for broader and more comprehensive partnerships in the future.

A critical point of inquiry emerges from the expressed concerns regarding the feasibility of executing peace initiatives in the context of prevailing tensions. The recent closure of United Nations entities, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Kuenning & Farhadova, 2025; Arakelyan, 2025), alongside the intense scrutiny faced by the Eurasian Partnership Foundation (EPF) (APA, 2025), the sole organization actively engaged in organizing projects and trainings related to conflict resolution and peacebuilding, has resulted in a significant void in potential candidates capable of leading post-treaty peace initiatives. This raises vital questions regarding the agency involved in the implementation of collaborative efforts, reflecting broader societal dynamics related to representation, inclusivity, and the capacities of individuals and organizations to navigate the complex landscape shaped by historical grievances and ongoing conflicts.

Engaging civil society members who are both willing and capable of fostering collaboration presents a substantial challenge, as it requires not only the establishment of a shared vision but also the cultivation of trust and dialogue. Additionally, it may necessitate the dismantling of

existing barriers to cooperation, thereby calling for a nuanced approach that considers the intricate interplay of social, cultural, and political factors that underpin these efforts.

In contrast, the interviews revealed a consensus on the complete absence of convergence concerning political issues. This point is particularly noteworthy, as it suggests that participants perceive political engagement as fraught with risks and tensions that overshadow any potential benefits of collaboration. The unwillingness to engage on political issues indicates a broader cultural and systemic barrier that may hinder constructive dialogue and partnership between civil society and government. Furthermore, the lack of viable opportunities for political collaboration has resulted in a state of waiting for civil society, leading to an expectation that conditions will improve following the signing of a peace treaty, and that subsequent relations among conflicting parties will become more nuanced and open for civil society to collaborate with the government on the matter.

Interestingly, another dimension of convergence emerged regarding the stance on keeping Russia out of the conflict context. It is noteworthy that while many participants agreed on this point, their motivations differed significantly. A segment of participants perceives Russia as a destabilizing force within the peace process, whose historical influence in the region is deemed inherently destructive. Conversely, others express ambivalence regarding Russia's colonial legacy and its intentions in the post-Soviet space, highlighting a lack of consensus on the broader implications of its role. This divergence highlights the complexity of shared sentiments in a sociopolitical context where various actors hold distinct agendas and perspectives, yet can find common ground on specific issues. The differing rationales behind this agreement also serve to illustrate how geopolitical dynamics can shape discourse around localized conflict and peacebuilding efforts.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the competing discourses of peace in post-war Azerbaijan, analyzing how the government and civil society construct fundamentally different visions of conflict resolution following the 2020 Second Karabakh War and the 2023 military operation. The study set out to understand how these narratives diverge and converge, the power dynamics that shape their legitimacy, and the implications for sustainable peacebuilding in an authoritarian context. By employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and semi-structured interviews, the research has revealed that peace in Azerbaijan is not a neutral or unified concept but a contested terrain where state dominance and civil society resistance collide.

The Azerbaijani government's narrative aligns with the framework of illiberal peace, framing peace as a militarized victory that prioritizes territorial integrity, national security, and historical justice. Through securitized language, historical legitimization, and the systematic exclusion of dissenting voices, the state reinforces a winner-centric peace that marginalizes reconciliation and pluralism. This approach reflects what scholars term "thick illiberal peace", where stability is imposed through authoritarian control rather than inclusive dialogue. In contrast, civil society actors, despite operating under severe repression, advocate for a liberal and emancipatory peace, emphasizing dialogue, transitional justice, and grassroots reconciliation. Their discourse, often articulated through cautious language and transnational advocacy, challenges the state's hegemonic narrative but remains constrained by legal restrictions, censorship, and political marginalization.

The analysis uncovered both divergence and occasional convergence between these narratives. While the state and civil society fundamentally disagree on the meaning of peace, with the former viewing it as security through victory and the latter as justice through dialogue, they paradoxically share rhetorical appeals to territorial integrity and international norms. However, this overlap is superficial; the state instrumentalizes these concepts to legitimize its authority, while civil society uses them to advocate for human rights and accountability. Practical collaboration between the two remains limited to non-political issues such as landmine clearance and environmental projects, as the government tightly controls any discourse that challenges its narrative.

The findings have broader implications for peace studies and conflict resolution. Azerbaijan's case demonstrates how military victories in authoritarian contexts can entrench illiberal peace models, where stability is achieved through coercion rather than reconciliation. This challenges conventional liberal peacebuilding assumptions, which often presume that democratic transitions follow conflict resolution. Instead, the research highlights the need for international actors to support local civil society resilience and transnational advocacy networks that sustain alternative peace narratives under repression. Future research should explore how digital activism and diaspora engagement contribute to discursive resistance in such constrained environments.

Ultimately, this thesis underscores that peace in Azerbaijan is a site of political struggle, shaped by asymmetrical power relations that determine whose vision prevails. While the state's narrative currently dominates, civil society's persistence suggests that alternative frameworks remain viable, even if marginalized. Sustainable peace will require not just the absence of war but the inclusion of dissenting voices and a redefinition of peace beyond state-imposed stability. The struggle over narratives continues, shaping the possibilities for genuine reconciliation in the South Caucasus and offering lessons for other conflict-affected societies navigating the tensions between authoritarian control and emancipatory change.

Final reflections

The research reaffirms that peace is not merely the cessation of violence but a dynamic, contested process. In Azerbaijan, the government's illiberal peacebuilding has consolidated its authority while suppressing pluralism, yet civil society's resilience reveals the enduring demand for justice and dialogue. The study's limitations—including reliance on publicly available texts and a small sample of civil society voices—suggest avenues for further investigation, particularly through ethnographic research on grassroots peace initiatives. Nevertheless, the findings contribute to critical debates on post-war narratives, authoritarian conflict management, and the possibilities for transformative peace in politically restrictive environments. As Azerbaijan navigates its post-war trajectory, the tension between state-imposed stability and society-centered reconciliation will remain central to its future—and to broader understandings of how peace is constructed, contested, and ultimately redefined.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Conceptualizing Peace

How would you define "peace" in the context of post-war Azerbaijan?

What do you see as the key differences between the government's definition of peace and the vision promoted by civil society?

How do you reconcile the concepts of "negative peace" (absence of violence) and "positive peace" (justice, reconciliation) in your work?

Civil Society's Role in Peacebuilding

What are the main challenges civil society faces in promoting alternative peace narratives in Azerbaijan?

Can you describe any specific initiatives or projects your organization has undertaken to foster dialogue or reconciliation?

How do you navigate the restrictions imposed by the government (e.g., laws on NGOs, media censorship) while advocating for peace?

Competing Narratives and Power Dynamics

How would you characterize the government's narrative of peace after the 2020 war? What are its strengths and limitations?

In what ways do civil society's peace narratives challenge or complement the state's discourse?

How do power asymmetries between the state and civil society affect the visibility and legitimacy of alternative peace visions?

Marginalized Perspectives

How are Armenian perspectives or the experiences of ethnic minorities addressed (or excluded) in Azerbaijani peace discourses?

What steps could be taken to ensure more inclusive dialogue in post-war reconciliation efforts?

Have you faced backlash for advocating for inclusive or dialogical approaches to peace? If so, how?

Future Pathways

What are the most critical steps needed to achieve sustainable peace in Azerbaijan?

Do you see opportunities for collaboration between civil society and the government on peacebuilding, despite current tensions?

How can civil society ensure its peace narratives gain broader public traction in a polarized environment?

Appendix 2: Online Interview Consent Form

Research Title: *Exploring Peace Perspectives in Post-War Azerbaijan: A Comparative Analysis of Governmental and Civil Society Views on Conflict Resolution*

Researcher: *Ibrahim Mammadli*

Supervisor: *Prof. Eiki Berg, University of Tartu*

Contact Email: *ibrahim.mammadli@ut.ee*

You are invited to participate in an academic research interview as part of a Master's thesis on post-war peace narratives in Azerbaijan. The purpose of this study is to explore how civil society actors define and articulate peace in contrast to official state narratives following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and subsequent developments.

This interview will be conducted remotely through a secure online platform such as Zoom, Skype, or Signal. It is expected to last approximately 30 minutes, depending on the depth of discussion. With your permission, the interview may be audio-recorded using the platform's recording feature or a secure external device. You may decline to be recorded and still participate fully in the interview.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any question or withdraw from the interview at any time, without giving a reason and without any consequences. You may also choose to remain anonymous and use a pseudonym. Your responses will be treated with strict confidentiality. No identifying information will be included in the thesis or any resulting publications unless you explicitly authorize it.

All data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and notes, will be stored securely on an encrypted device. These materials will be used solely for academic analysis and will be deleted after the completion of the research project. None of your information will be shared with third parties, and no part of the conversation will be publicly attributed to you unless you grant permission.

If you agree to participate, please confirm your consent by replying to this message with a statement such as:

“I have read and understood the information provided, and I consent to participate in the interview. I [do/do not] agree to the audio recording of the conversation.”

Please include your name or a preferred pseudonym and the date in your reply. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at any time.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best regards,

Ibrahim Mammadli

Master's Student, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies

University of Tartu

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