



# Youth Life in Nagorno-Karabakh: The Two Realities of War and Peace

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*In 1997, she founded the first English Speaking Club in the capital, Stepanakert, which developed into a non-governmental organization as Artsakh Youth Development Center (AYDC) in 2011, and today it is one of the most active youth organizations in the country. She is involved in many pan-Armenian and international youth projects. She is also a trainer on project designing and management, leadership, healthy lifestyles, intercultural learning and peace building. Within the framework of European youth projects, she came into contact with Swiss youth groups (see page 29 of this Bulletin) and got the opportunity to join a project in Switzerland (2012).*

Forty percent of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh is under the age of 21. All of whom did not experience the terrible war with Azerbaijan that resulted in a ceasefire in May 1994. Although full-scale conflict ended at that time, the two armies continue to face each other across a Line of Contact that extends around the whole of this independent, Armenian state, unrecognized by all members of the UN. Sadly, each year, young men are killed by Azerbaijani sniper fire, re-opening up old wounds across the whole country that still suffers the pain of the legacy of the early 90s. Over a few weeks' period in late July/early August 2014, the friction between the two sides increased significantly, to the worst level in the last 20 years, resulting in many deaths of soldiers. This caused great concern for the 150,000 people living in this small country.

For the Youth in Nagorno-Karabakh, they find themselves in a strange situation. Whether they live in the major towns of Stepanakert, or Shushi, or one of the many villages dotted throughout the mountains and countryside, life is very peaceful and safe. They have heard all of the stories of war and see the effects of it on people and buildings, but they have not experienced it. Paradoxically, just a short distance from where they live, there is an armed conflict. The threat of a full-scale war is there 24 hours a day.

For them, it is normal, they barely give it much consideration; for the majority of people in the

Western world, their life would go into a suspended state, frozen with fear, waiting for the unexpected, if they were presented with this situation.

As Nagorno-Karabakh re-built itself after the ruinous war, the younger population grew, developed, and became more active, so it is now an important part of the civil society. As the recent clashes were causing disquiet throughout the country and in the rest of the world, the Youth did not sit back. Small volunteer groups were formed by young activists, political leaders, students and graduates, to take special provisions to the young men on the front line, but most importantly to show their support at this difficult time by staying with them in the trenches on the frontline. In many cases, the soldiers were their friends, as all men have to spend 2 years in the army, beginning from the age of 18.

## Education System

During its time within the Soviet Union, Nagorno-Karabakh had a good education system. In re-building the country, the government has invested a lot in ensuring that the youth has the best possible start in life. Whether this be from the small schools in the rural villages through to the main State Universities in Stepanakert (ca. 50'000 inhabitants). Shortly, every child in education, wherever they live in the country, will have access to a computer and

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The attendees at the Eco-Camp in Khndzristan village present their findings and plans to the invited guests.

*Photo by Russell Pollard (www.artsakh.org.uk)*



Youth of Stepanakert celebrate the Anniversary of the naming of their city after the leader Stepan Shahumyan.

*Photo by Russell Pollard (www.artsakh.org.uk)*



The people of Stepanakert come out in their thousands, to honour a soldier who was killed on Jan. 20, 2014 repelling an Azeri force engaged in a probing action against Karabakh defensive positions along the Line of Contact.

*Photo by Susanna Petrosyan*



New recruits to the NKR Army (Nagorno-Karabakh Republic Defense Army) go through their training program.

*Photo by Russell Pollard (www.artsakh.org.uk)*



Members of Artsakh Youth Development Center visit the village Nor Maragha to give some presents and spread some Christmas spirit.

*Photo by Susanna Petrosyan*



Children at the school in Khndzristan village discuss what they want for the future of their village.

*Photo by Russell Pollard (www.artsakh.org.uk)*



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high-speed internet connection. This includes some of the remotest locations in the mountains.

Artsakh State University is the leading educational institution in the country, which has started the modernization of education according to the European system shaped by the Bologna process since 2005. But as mentioned earlier, Nagorno-Karabakh is not a recognized country, the students and postgraduates don't have equal opportunities for studies and exchanges abroad.

The recent international conference organized on 27-29 June 2014 in Stepanakert, entitled "Education without Discrimination: Bologna Context" was the first attempt to raise the question worldwide by bringing together international experts with officials and lawmakers from Armenia, the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (Transnistria), Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh), Basque Country, and Flanders.

The main purpose of the conference was to address the issue of equal rights to education and the principle of non-discrimination. The conference highlighted the importance of cooperation within a single European Higher Education Area, especially when it comes to the integration of non-recognized states, such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

### **Non-Governmental Organizations**

In addition to the formal educational structure, Nagorno-Karabakh has a healthy Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) community, many of which support the youth sector with a broad range of non-formal educational activities. The largest of these, based in Stepanakert is the Artsakh Youth Development Center (AYDC). It grew from its modest beginnings as a youth club, through providing English language tuition to a fully-fledged NGO nearly 3 years ago. It gives the local youth, and those from the surrounding villages, the opportunity to improve their English, German, French and Spanish language skills, robotics and computing, as well as to become involved in a range of activities that contribute to the wider civil society.

During the post-war recovery period, priorities have necessarily been on the basics of the infrastructure, as well as on ensuring that everyone can satisfy at least the most fundamental needs that

exist in any life. This is a long process. Many of the issues that are associated with a more affluent country have yet to be fully addressed. A good example of this is the care of the environment, nature, re-cycling and being mindful about the consumption of natural resources.

To start improving awareness of this amongst the youth, but also to engage with the rest of the population, AYDC has collaborated with the Young Biologists Association (YBA) in Yerevan to work on a long-term program on environmental and ecological awareness. The most recent eco-camp took place in Khndzristan (a small village near to Stepanakert). This was a five day event that brought together young people from different regions of Karabakh and Armenia. There was a mixture of presentations, nature walks, and workshops with the objective of getting all of the youth to think about how they impact on the environment, and how they could individually and collectively influence their communities to be more aware of their "green" responsibilities. A number of ideas were generated about how waste might be recycled, and also how the wide variety of fresh products that are available can be used for healthy living. The value and importance of this event was further enhanced by the idea to make the village an eco-village and to develop eco- and agro-tourism there.

AYDC also realizes a lot of charity programs, through which young people make their small contributions to village schools. Nor Maragha (translated from the Armenian language, this proper name literally means "New Maragha") is a small village about an hour's drive from Stepanakert and exemplifies some of the legacies of war that people are living with. The majority of the people who live there used to live in Maragha. This was a village of about 4500 people in the original Soviet territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and it was subject to a horrific massacre in April 1992 at the hands of the Azerbaijani army. About 100 people were badly mutilated, the rest fled. Since 1994, Maragha has been on the Azerbaijani side of the "Line of Contact". The villagers who fled settled in an old Azerbaijani village, which is now on the Armenian side of the border, and which is nowadays known as Nor Maragha ("New Maragha"). As a result of



this situation and the difficulty of getting paid work, many of the people there are very poor, and have little in the sense of material possessions.

Each year near to Christmas, members of AYDC in conjunction with an Armenian partner organization from Yerevan, do fundraising. So they can make a special day for the small children in the village. They arrange for a “Santa Claus”, who brings books and other gifts, as well as putting on a small party, with music and dancing. Everything involved is modest and costs little money, however, it is about creating community cohesion and giving the opportunity for the youth to be active in helping others. This is really important in Nagorno-Karabakh with its most unusual history.

### Peace Negotiations

To the world community, Nagorno-Karabakh is seen as a conflict between politicians and soldiers, facing each other along the border, with interminable discussions about territorial integrity and self-determination. The traditional view is that the only road to peace is through resolving and negotiating these points. 20 years of discussions through the formal forums have achieved nothing.

Through the various youth-organizations more young people are travelling abroad, talking to their peers in other countries, seeing other perspectives,

and helping them to develop an understanding of peace. Occasionally, these forums involve people from Azerbaijan as well as Nagorno-Karabakh. Progressively, the participants realize that they can talk to each other in a mature way, and explore their differences, and, more importantly, discover how similar they are. Cynics might say that this will make little difference to the situation, and that such an approach will take decades to achieve anything. But whilst ever there is peace, and if talking on an individual basis makes some contribution to securing this, then this has to be the most sensible option.

It is understandable that people who were adults during the war may have entrenched views about the other side. There is a great opportunity for those born after the ceasefire to be more flexible in their thinking. This is the real future of the process – it is about realizing that each person is a human being, and on that level, everyone from both sides wants the same thing – they simply want peace.

#### Websites/Sources:

Artsakh Youth Development Center NGO (AYDC), <https://www.facebook.com/artsakhyouthdevelopmentcenter>

Eco-Village (development of eco-camps mentioned in the section on NGOs), <http://ecovillage.am/>

Artsakh State University, <http://www.asu.am/>

NKR – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.nkr.am/en/>

The Swiss-based association „Youth Exchanges without Borders“ is a tax exempted charity, registered in Emmenbrücke, Canton of Lucerne. Its members are regularly organizing youth exchanges with young people from South Caucasus and other countries from the former Soviet Union. In the framework of a youth exchange, participants from different countries work during a week on a specific topic such as the role of media in South Caucasus. Beside the thematic work, a youth exchange offers a platform for cultural exchanges.

Thanks to its networks from previous projects the association’s staff could connect the author of this article with the editors of the publication at hand.

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