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Recommendations

Anahit Shirinyan and Zaur Shiriyev

The two sides have reached an important agreement on reducing tension and opening a channel of communication that is already operating. This consensus is based on a verbal agreement, and failing to adhere to it would damage the fragile mutual trust. Below are a few recommendations that could facilitate healthier discourses and a more conducive environment overall.

To the government of Azerbaijan and Armenia

Rhetoric, communication, and public debates

Messages are not geared only to domestic audiences. Any populist, bellicose rhetoric targeting domestic audiences also reaches the other side and creates a negative image of the other. Moreover, it may generate responses not only in rhetorical forms but also in the form of actions and overreactions where the snowball-effect escalation is likely. The sides should therefore refrain from employing hardline and war rhetoric.

In October, two new Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokespersons, who are both women, were appointed in Azerbaijan and Armenia. This is a fresh opportunity to introduce a more nuanced rhetoric overall when commenting on issues related to the conflict. The two sides should explore ways of increasing engagement with their media and encouraging better cooperation with online and traditional media agencies.

The two sides should differentiate between society and government. The sides, considering that mutual “messaging” is inevitable, should ensure that “warning messages” do not target people—the Armenians and Azerbaijanis as a whole. Similarly, the sides should refrain from using language that dehumanizes the other.

Given that the sides may be at different thinking “frequencies,” the possibility that rhetoric and action will be misinterpreted is high. For example, what may be intended as a gesture of goodwill might be interpreted as condescending or a mere PR stunt by the other side. It is therefore crucial that messages and discourses are formulated clearly, and the risks of misinterpretation are measured and avoided.

The sides should combat misinformation by refuting it in a timely and operative manner, and not allow it to stir more antagonism and enmity.

The sides should start opening up public debates on what is discussed at the negotiations table. Each side should not expect talk of compromises if they are not debating compromises at home.

Mutual Symbolic Gestures

The merit of small symbolic gestures should not be underestimated, and gestures of goodwill should be accepted as such. Such gestures could be allowing mutual visits to sites of memory or maintaining each other’s graves situated in their respective territories. Public diplomacy activities will also help build trust and create a more conducive atmosphere.

Both societies are eager to see tangible results, such as the implementation of the 2014 Paris agreement on the solution of problems related to prisoners of war, hostages, and missing persons. The release of detainees and hostages from both sides would be welcomed. Both sides are open to this in theory, as reflected in the Vienna statement in May 2016, which reiterated support for the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The modalities—how to improve and support ICRC’s work—are necessary. This can bring tangible results on a small scale and help transform the human face of the conflict.

Although there is skepticism in Azerbaijan towards the Armenian first lady’s “Women for Peace” initiative, there could be merit in exploring its possibilities. The Armenian side could in turn explore ways of being more proactive in reaching out to Azerbaijani mothers. This initiative can transform from being a women-led peace campaign into participation at the negotiations table and peacebuilding.

To the media and opinion makers

Media and opinion makers should be mindful that they are generating discourses and therefore are responsible for the language and tone they

use when covering the conflict. They should refrain from comments that dehumanize the other.

To the international community and international donors

The international community and mediators could help advocate these recommendations among respective parties and encourage change of tone and rhetoric as well as give a green light to public diplomacy initiatives at the highest level. The latter, in particular, would ensure there are no official or unofficial obstructions for such initiatives.

International donors could support trainings for media representatives on conflict transformation and conflict-related vocabulary to promote more sensitive messaging in the media outlets of the two countries.