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Re-Introducing Water to the Armenia-Azerbaijan Agenda: Prospects for Transboundary Water Cooperation in the Post-2020 Peace Processes¹

Sofya Manukyan, Heydar Isayev

While negotiations are progressing between Armenia and Azerbaijan as a result of different mediation attempts following the 2020 war and even bilateral communication has been launched at the level of the military and foreign ministers of the two countries, the very important issue of water management remains left out of the discussions. Different communities in Armenia, Azerbaijan, as well as Nagorno-Karabakh have been experiencing difficulties with access to water for drinking and irrigation, which are problems now further complicated in the aftermath of the war. This paper looks at water-related problems, possible solutions drawing on cases in other regions, and prospects for transboundary water management between Armenia and Azerbaijan involving the water specialists of the two countries.

Introduction

The November 9, 2020 ceasefire agreement signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia ended the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and also laid the foundation for negotiations to resolve multiple humanitarian issues stemming from the war and the decades-long conflict in general. The return of Armenian and

¹ This article was written before September 2022.

Azerbaijani displaced populations to their homes, the exchange of prisoners of war, the return of the bodies of dead military servicemen, and the unblocking of economically important transport routes were some of the points of that agreement. While some of them are still far from being accomplished, there is indeed notable progress in the sense that there are at least negotiations taking place between Armenia and Azerbaijan considering the years of clashes and the prolonged absence of communication (Isayev, Kucera, and Mejlumyan 2022).

However, there is one issue, no less important than other points of the agreement, that has been omitted from official discourse. That is the issue of transboundary waters and the need for cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This is important considering that civilian populations in Nagorno-Karabakh (Mnatsakanyan 2021), as well as rural Armenia (1lurer.am 2021) and central Azerbaijan (Eurasianet 2020), have been suffering from the decline in drinking and irrigation water in recent years. Even though there have been follow-up meetings, statements, and trilateral working groups (Kucera 2021) for addressing the shortcomings of the November 9 statement regarding a variety of issues including border delimitation, mine clearance, and the construction of regional transport routes, the basic necessity of human life, water—which is also dubbed by some (Kuyumjian 2021) as one of the reasons for the war—was left out of the discussions.

The Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh in particular has been experiencing trouble with access to drinking water in the aftermath of the 2020 war, given that Azerbaijan took control of large territories including the majority of dams and hydropower plants in the region. At the same time, people in central Azerbaijan, who have been suffering from decreasing water in the Kura River for the last couple of years, have not seen an improvement in water supply despite of retaking the dams. Also, Azerbaijan has long been complaining about polluted transboundary rivers crossing from Armenia to Azerbaijan (Mehdiyev 2021). Therefore, there needs to be cooperation to identify the scale of the problems and what can be done to resolve the water-related issues. However, there is no norm or treaty regulating water flows between the three countries of the South Caucasus. While Azerbaijan and Georgia have started working (UNECE 2014) in that direction by drafting an agreement, Armenia and

Azerbaijan have not even discussed the possibility of it, although the climate crisis is increasingly imposing such an agenda.

Despite the end of the 2020 war and steps toward a peace agreement, the prospects for cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan seem to be hindered by traumas and hostility between people, even if it is for such an important issue as water. On the other hand, as our study shows, there are specialists, water experts, who could readily start a narrow-specialized professional process. In this way, they can not only solve water-related problems in the region in response to a much bigger challenge, the climate crisis, but also pave a way toward reducing hostility and preparing the ground for other types of cooperation. For this article, we have interviewed experts in water management from Armenia and Azerbaijan. We tried to understand the possibilities for starting such cooperation and which exact transboundary water issues cooperation could help solve.

Considering that transboundary water problems have been common in other regions of the world as well, including in countries with conflicts, we also look at some cases to bring a more global perspective to our regional problems. Combining regional and global experiences in our article, we provide recommendations that we hope will reach the decision-makers in and beyond our region. Thus, our article covers the issues of domestic water (mis)management, the past and future of regional water cooperation, and global experiences of transboundary cooperation in the context of conflict. It concludes by summarizing the recommendations of experts for regional cooperation in the South Caucasus.

Environmental Peacebuilding Cases from the World

Cooperation on environmental issues between countries with a mutual history of conflict, known otherwise as environmental peacebuilding, is a broad and growing field of research and practice. The scope of environmental peacebuilding varies from efforts to prevent or mediate environment-related conflicts to managing natural resources as part of peacebuilding processes and integrating climate change concerns into peacebuilding (Ide 2020). Water is among the top environmental peacebuilding priorities due to its cross-border nature, on which peace processes usually concentrate, although other issues such as nature conservation can also create a platform for cooperation.

With the advantages of environmental peacebuilding, however, also come various drawbacks. In view of the climate crisis, environmental peacebuilding can lead merely to coordinated resource exploitation, as was the case in Aral Sea basin (Ide 2020). While this international water cooperation aimed at promoting peaceful relations among the basin countries, the over-extraction of water from transboundary rivers feeding the Aral Sea for water-intensive cotton cultivation, for example, resulted in its partial dry-up. Therefore, long-term environmental peacebuilding initiatives have to consider climate change and in no way concentrate solely on peace at any cost. Otherwise, it will tend only toward short-term peacebuilding.

Even after 30 years of independence, countries in Central Asia have not solved their border delimitation and demarcation issues and therefore territorial disputes often prevent them from wider cooperation (Baisalov 2021). The latest clash over water distribution in the region in 2021 between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan was caused by disputed sections on the border between the two countries. Therefore, mismanagement of transboundary rivers (such as major transboundary rivers like Syr Darya, Amu Darya, and some of their tributaries) and border conflicts in the region are mutually conducive.

The year 2021 turned out to be specifically dry for Central Asia. One of the two upstream countries, Kyrgyzstan, had to struggle with at least three challenges: providing water for irrigation to its farmers, collecting enough water in reservoirs for the operation of hydropower plants to produce electricity, and leaving enough water in rivers (especially the River Naryn) for use by downstream countries (Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan). Kyrgyzstan addressed one of the challenges by releasing enough water for its downstream neighbors in return for electricity (Pannier 2021). While in terms of conflict prevention this can be considered a positive occurrence, for many Kyrgyzstanis this is as well an unpopular and even an undemocratic step, considering that farmers in Kyrgyzstan themselves suffered from lack of irrigation water (Kopytin 2021). Moreover, the public seemed to be unaware of the amount of water released to neighboring countries, receiving news of this only when Kazakhstan's prime minister thanked Kyrgyzstan for its generosity. Additionally, even though Kyrgyzstan received electricity in return, it has paid for it (Pannier 2021).

Apart from Kyrgyzstan, climate change is impacting Tajikistan as another upstream country in the region. Some of the major rivers in both Tajikistan (the Vakhsh river; UNDP 2012) and Kyrgyzstan (the Naryn river; Stagni et al. 2011) are fed by glaciers that are melting due to climate change. Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Energy has announced that in the past several years, more water has flown out rather than into the country's largest Toktogul reservoir and that every year there is a gradual decrease in water level in the reservoir by about 1.5-1.8 billion c/m (Pannier 2021). And yet, both countries look forward to constructing more dams for hydropower. This can be not only economically unsustainable but also a potential source of conflict with neighbors. This case demonstrates that any short-term solution to environmental problems, especially of a transboundary character, is only a form of short-term prevention of political crisis and conflicts among countries. Environmental cooperation and peacebuilding have to take into account the current global and local climate challenges.

India and Pakistan represent another region with conflicts over water distribution problems. Their territorial dispute is over the Kashmir and Jammu regions, through which the Indus, Chenab, and Jhelum rivers pass while flowing into the fertile lands in northern India and eastern Pakistan (Snedden 2019). In addition to the problem with the management of these transboundary rivers, India and Pakistan both depend on Himalayan glaciers which are, in turn, shrinking due to climate change, thus threatening the long-term water security of the communities and the Indus Waters Treaty. The latter was signed in 1960 between India and Pakistan, fixing and delimiting the rights and obligations of both countries concerning the use of waters of the Indus River system. Despite the treaty, several challenges in this region threaten not only environmental-socio-economic situation of the locals but the fragile stability in the region (Climate Diplomacy n.d.). In addition to the melting Himalayan glaciers, overextraction and declining groundwater resources are other major challenges in the Indus Basin. Agriculture in both Pakistan and Northern India heavily depends on these sources. Moreover, India is interested in building more dams, which is not supported by Pakistan (Climate Diplomacy n.d.). Overall, this treaty has shortcomings. For example, it was drafted at a time when climate change was not considered and includes provisions only for surface but not ground water.

However, the regular meetings of the Permanent Indus Commission, a bilateral commission created to implement the Indus Waters Treaty, have allowed for solutions to water disputes and the avoidance of water wars in the past via legal procedures provided within the framework of the treaty (Express News Service 2022). While the sides continue blaming each other and presenting the other side as the root of such problems as floods due to water mismanagement (Climate Diplomacy n.d.), in its 118th meeting in spring of 2022 the Permanent Indus Commission, for example, agreed to implement inspections as well as to share flood information in advance.

The aforementioned examples, and in general the literature on other cases of transboundary management of water resources especially in conflict regions, demonstrate that environmental peacebuilding can be a tool in the hands of politicians and diplomats for manipulations and disputes. And yet water can and has helped pave the way for cooperation even between hostile states. Therefore, we believe that the negotiating of a water treaty could be a good start for collaboration between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Expert Opinions on Water Management in Armenia and Azerbaijan and Prospects for Cooperation

Management of the water sector is a real problem for both Armenia and Azerbaijan due to factors such as state bureaucracy and political unwillingness to recognize environmental protection as a priority issue. Regional or transboundary cooperation for better water management seems to be a challenging task for the bureaucratic institutions of both countries, primarily because of the recent escalation of the conflict between them in 2020. And yet, cooperation was possible in past decades. Experts interviewed for this article elaborate on past experiences and post-2020 prospects. To start with, we present below a general overview of some of the problems with water management in each country as highlighted by experts.

Expert Views on Domestic Water Mismanagement

One of the water management problems Armenian experts mention is the inadequate use of water from rivers as well as from Lake Sevan. Lusine Taslakyan, a water management expert and doctoral research assistant in

the Department of Soil and Water Systems at the University of Idaho in the USA, mentioned in our interview that although the war in 2020 resulted in the loss of some streams near the borders, state bodies should pay more attention to the usage of water sources in Armenia. Taslakyan comments:

We don't take care of what we have. Since water is not equally distributed in Armenia both spatially and seasonally, the need for reservoir construction was highlighted and prioritized by the National Water Program adopted in 2006. Currently, the per capita storage capacity is about 450 cubic meters, which is very low for a semiarid country and is less than 20 percent of the storage capacity of Azerbaijan and Turkey. Yet despite this priority, few actual steps were taken. We need to put more efforts for saving resources within our borders and for better management. Meanwhile, there is also decrease in river flow from Turkey, since they continue dam construction, including on the River Kars which flows to the Akhuryan dam which both countries use 50-50% according to agreements between the USSR and Turkey (1927 and 1973). (Interview with Taslakyan 2022)

Additionally, Taslakyan highlighted the mismanagement of Lake Sevan, since wastewaters flow to Sevan untreated, although for years funds have been allocated to solve the problem. She also mentioned the depletion of groundwater sources in the Ararat valley as a result of the overuse of water by fish farms there. Another expert, the hydrologist Benjamin Zakaryan, pointed in particular to the problem of unsustainable water use in Armenia by fish farms. He also noted that the transboundary water problem is not limited to Armenia and Azerbaijan as Turkey is actively constructing dams that threaten the Akhuryan reservoir jointly used by Armenia and Turkey and harming the flow of the Araks River.

In Azerbaijan, as Jeanene Mitchell, an international development and area studies expert in the South Caucasus and Turkey, highlights, there are also problems of mismanagement on the institutional level, as well as a clash of interests of various stakeholders, especially in dam management resulted from lack of cooperation among state agencies. As an example, she mentions a contradiction between the state energy company Azerenergy, which has incentive to keep the water in the dams very high

to generate electricity, and the state water supply company Azersu, which has the mandate to provide drinking water to the local populations and to continue developing the corresponding infrastructure. Therefore, Mitchell notes that while Azerenergy tries to keep the water in reservoirs to build hydropower, it is in Azersu's best interest to take that water from reservoirs to people and businesses. In addition, she points out that another actor, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, urges other stakeholders to keep the water levels low at reservoirs not to let flooding happen. In 2010, floods occurred at the confluence of the Kura and Aras, exposing the lack of coordination and cooperation among these state entities (RFE/RL 2010).

As Mitchell says, a problematic outcome of this non-cooperation is the absence of data sharing between relevant ministries involved in water management. She believes that if authorities and scientists cannot organize the process at the domestic level, it is even harder to do so at the transboundary level. The transboundary complications combined with the already strained domestic situation intensify the problems further. Mitchell is also concerned about the problems of water pollution, waste, and drought in Azerbaijan. For example, she mentioned that over 50% of irrigation water is lost due to evaporation and leaks.

Expert Experiences from Pre-2020 Transboundary Cooperation

Cooperation between Armenia, Azerbaijan and other countries of the Kura-Araks river basin, specifically Georgia, was not uncommon prior to the war in 2020. Speaking of such cooperation experience in the past, Lusine Taslakyan mentions different projects related to transboundary water management in the Kura-Araks basin and joint monitoring there. For example, the EU-funded transboundary river management project supported this activity in the past. It allowed for specialists from the three countries to take water samples, analyze them in their national laboratories, and verify the results. Such joint projects allowed for an understanding of where the pollution sources of transboundary rivers were. This prevented reciprocal blaming.

Taslakyan notes the gradual deterioration in communication between the two countries in the coming years:

In 2004, I was working in the USAID project Water Management in the South Caucasus. We used to work in an office where there was a landline phone. With that phone we could directly call our colleagues in Baku. Now, this is unimaginable. The relations between the two countries aggravated through time. Already after 2011, a meeting was held in Tbilisi within a UNDP project in which, apart from project experts, government representatives were present too. During that meeting the representative of their [Azerbaijan's] Ministry of Nature Protection started complaining about our maps and that Nagorno-Karabakh was visible on that map. They were also complaining that they had no access to carry out water monitoring in those territories. I don't understand when that shift took place and things changed. But initially it wasn't like that. Within our projects we were trying to speak strictly on subjects related to our specializations—nothing about the conflict.

Taslakyan is especially skeptical about the post-2020 situation: “Now I am afraid that after this shift of attitude and especially after this [2020] war, I don't imagine any relations considering the current tension.”

Shahana Bilalova—PhD fellow in the NEWAVE project and member of the research group Governance, Participation, and Sustainability at Leuphana University—has noticed that since November 2020 there has been no proper communication on water management topics even between Georgia and Azerbaijan, not to mention Armenia and Azerbaijan. But she hopes that especially after the signing of the peace agreement, there will be more peacebuilding efforts and eventually a better political atmosphere for water management between the two sides will emerge.

Jeanene Mitchell, who directed stakeholder engagement for a UNDP-Global Environment Facility water project in the Kura River Basin of Azerbaijan and Georgia, remembers the times when Armenian and Azerbaijani water specialists sat together at transboundary project events. Recalling their interactions, Mitchell concludes that there was actually a basis for cooperation, at least on the human level. In this regard, she suggests: “Part of that came from the fact that many of them, at least in the former generation, personally knew each other. They spoke the same language in the context of water.”

Mitchell points to the situation of low trust between Armenia and Azerbaijan, especially in the post-2020 period, when a lot of water resources and infrastructure of disputed Nagorno-Karabakh ended up under Azerbaijani control. She remembers that there was some conversation that mutual trust would increase if there was an exchange of water for energy, as was happening in Central Asia, and there are many local level contexts where she thinks there would be potential for cooperation and confidence building. Nevertheless, she sees “a highly securitized approach to management of the returned territories” due to the low level of trust.

Another expert in Water Resources Management, Vahagn Tonoyan, mentions that mediated meetings in the past decades faced obstacles for political reasons but accomplished successes as a result of technical cooperation. Such success stories include: tripartite monitoring of water quality (Georgia included) with exchange of data among all participants; participation in inter-laboratory analyses and joint discussion of the results; vulnerability assessment of water resources in the Aghstev river basin in the context of climate change, etc. As Tonoyan sees the situation, “despite the willingness on the Armenian side to expand cooperation, the Azerbaijani side avoided direct (non-mediated) and more comprehensive cooperation due to political reasons.” After the war in 2020, not even mediated cooperation has taken place, though this was also due to the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

Another expert who spoke of past experiences of cooperation is Rovshan Abbasov, leading specialist at a UN Water governance project in Azerbaijan, representative of the Global Alliance for Pollution and Health in Azerbaijan, and head of the water group at a state program on ecosystems assessment. Abbasov believes that transboundary water cooperation projects should not only be management projects but also scientific. He is certain that such projects in the past should have produced not only reports but also a positive physical change in terms of water abundance and ecosystem. Expressing readiness for getting involved in such scientific cooperation, Abbasov acknowledges the previous efforts of Armenian authors who conducted extensive research on the pollution of such transboundary rivers as Voghji/Oxchu and Vorotan/Bazar. Abbasov emphasized the value of these rivers, especially for the populations of

goldfish and sturgeon, which in case of joint efforts might increase once again throughout the area.

Expert Opinions on Post-2020 Water Cooperation Prospects

The war between the two countries in 2020 has complicated the prospects for cooperation on any issue. However, the vitality of water and the challenges posed to people's everyday lives by water mismanagement as well as by climate change push for more flexibility and readiness to tackle transboundary water issues. Despite experts' differing views on the mode of cooperation--whether it should be on the community, government, or other level, or whether it should involve legal or other mediums—the need for cooperation itself is hardly excluded.

According to Taslakyan, there are already some water management tools that could be beneficial not only within Armenia but also for regional cooperation. For example, ratifying the Water and Health Protocol under the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and Lakes by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE Water Convention), even without signing the convention, would allow the funding of projects related to the quality and supply of drinking and irrigation water. Meanwhile, its ratification would also allow for regional cooperation and dialogue. Recognizing the important role of international organizations in transboundary water management projects, Taslakyan advocates for collaboration mediated by international actors on such issues as access to cross-border river basins and monitoring water quality and quantity of the rivers that flow across the borders. Such joint monitoring should be organized outside of the political context. The role of international organizations in mediating this process is thus important. For many years, USAID, UNDP/GEF, EU, and SIDA mediated and coordinated dialogue on this issue between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The idea was that states would then continue this process on their own. But it did not happen, as donor support was not sufficiently sustainable. According to Taslakyan, "The 2020 war was to some extent war for water, but good management of water could also be the joint goal and ground for dialogue."

Mitchell sees the necessity for Azerbaijan of cooperation as a downstream country, also considering the additional problems it has with floods that need to be dealt with. Thus, she argues that information exchange between

upstream and downstream countries is extremely important from a water management perspective as well as from a human safety perspective. She points out that hydrological data exchange is an issue that is easier to start with when it comes to launching transboundary cooperation and concluding corresponding agreements. The expert also mentions that the contribution of a downstream country to the upstream country in return for water should also be considered in this process. As an example, Mitchell recalls the case of Central Asia where downstream countries provided the upstream ones with energy in exchange for water. Another idea proposed by Mitchell is to implement some sort of pilot project for border communities, from which some community or group of communities would benefit. This can be arranged in the form of cooperative management of water resources, for example, on water exchange between farmers in Tovuz and Tavush regions.

However, Shahana Bilalova notes that the war happened very recently and people still have emotionally difficult memories of hostility: “even though experts say that the transboundary water management should start at the local governance level, it is always better to involve neutral actors, so that they would moderate the process.” She believes “it is risky to put together the local communities of the two countries and make them discuss water issues, although it could work with proper moderation.” Bilalova mentions the contexts of India-Pakistan and Israel-Palestine conflicts as examples. The expert suggests, “mediators should be not those that are known for their sympathy towards Armenia or Azerbaijan, such as Turkey, but really neutral actors.”

Beniamin Zakaryan, however, expresses his skepticism regarding cooperation: “I don’t imagine any cooperation at this stage, not until there is an international legal tool preventing harm. We need time because now dialogue is impossible. There is the hatred of 20-30 years. So, time is necessary, as well as education before any dialogue. Now only international laws can work, if these (corresponding agreements) are signed and ratified.” Nevertheless, Vahagn Tonoyan believes that small steps could be taken in the short run and they would benefit both Armenia and Azerbaijan considering the vulnerability of regional water resources to climate change. These small steps should be such that would strengthen trust between experts, also considering priorities in water management.

Tonoyan mentions some of the tools that can be used on this path, since both countries aim at integrating their legislation and management principles with the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD). In this regard, both sides could work on transitioning from separate water monitoring and assessment systems to developing a joint approach based on EU WFD principles. Synchronization of environmental flow assessment methodologies is another area where hydrologists from both countries could work. Another possibility for cooperation is joint assessment of water resource vulnerability due to climate change in transboundary water basins (Aghstev, the tributaries of Kura River, Arpa, etc.) which would provide more reliable results when used with existing hydrological and meteorological data from both countries.

And yet, Tonoyan also highlights the need for wider regional cooperation considering that rivers recognize no borders and that it will hardly be enough for Armenia simply to ratify the UNECE Water Convention for the sustainable management of shared water resources (UNECE n/d). Among the countries of the Kura-Araks water basin (covering territories of Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkey), only Azerbaijan has signed and ratified it. Until this convention is signed by Turkey, where the Kura and Araks rivers are formed, it does not make much sense for other countries to sign it, as it will be impossible to fully use this international legal tool for regulating transboundary water cooperation. Furthermore, according to Tonoyan, currently Turkey is actively constructing dams on the Araks river basin for irrigation purposes, which will result in an estimated 56% reduction of the average annual flow in Araks transboundary river on the border with Armenia.

Rovshan Abbasov sees the ratification of the Water Convention by Azerbaijan as a sign of readiness to work together in the management of transboundary rivers. According to him, cooperation on water management is in the national interest of Azerbaijan. As a study conducted by Abbasov and his team shows, Azerbaijan will experience water stress in the near future. That is the reason why such cooperation is pivotal for the country. He also highlights that Georgia and Turkey already “keep much of the water” that could come to Azerbaijan. Without the regional cooperation on water management, the situation in Azerbaijan would be much more difficult.

Our key conclusion from the summary of the expert interviews is that Armenian experts agree that a narrow specialized approach to water cooperation particularly between Armenia and Azerbaijan should be among the first steps toward the regional cooperation that need to eventually involve all five countries of the Kura-Araks river basin (including Turkey and Iran). Such cooperation can be initially focused on the monitoring of water quality and quantity of transboundary rivers or on developing joint approaches for harmonizing each other's legislations and principles with wider international documents such as the EU Water Framework Directive. Still, considering the role of Turkey as the formation area of the Kura-Aras river basin, its involvement in regional cooperation even if at later stages would be an important step towards addressing climate challenges in the region as well as for water conflict prevention. Interviews with experts from Azerbaijan also show readiness on their side for cooperation on water issues, especially at the level of experts and scientists. Moreover, such options as exchanging water for energy were suggested based on the case in Central Asia, which could be a parallel or subsequent step of cooperation taken at the diplomatic level. This can also create further incentives for both sides to get involved in the process as well as for subsequent implementation of the agreed principles.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Possible Cooperation

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have domestic problems with water management. While water management can create additional obstacles for transboundary cooperation, it can also create opportunities for improving water quality and quantity in rivers through joint monitoring which could also involve foreign companies operating in the region that have their share in impacting water quality in rivers. The potential of transboundary cooperation resulting in improving domestic management is viable.

Another important necessity is the gradual transformation of cooperation format in terms of translating technical cooperation, such as river monitoring, to legislative amendments. Gradual transformation should also include the shift from bilateral cooperation to multi-stakeholder and multi-national cooperation, i.e. from the collaboration of narrow specialists between the two countries at the initial stages to increasing the number of participating stakeholders, e.g. communities and industries, as

well as working on shifting from cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan to involving all five river basin countries.

It is worth mentioning that although water quality flowing from Armenia to Azerbaijan (directly or via Georgia) might be compromised due to industrial activities on the Armenian side, Armenia's state has hardly ever had a policy of pressuring Azerbaijan through deteriorating water quality and quantity for two obvious reasons. First, any water reaching the border goes through various communities in Armenia itself. Second, as we can conclude from Armenian experts' interviews, the policy of construction of reservoirs in Armenia for satisfying its own population's needs has never been realized to a full extent. Therefore, this aspect of water quality and quantity management could serve as a starting point for avenues for dialogue diverting from inter-state hostility.

Considering the impacts of climate change on the environment and economics but also on peace processes, one more platform for collaboration could be the joint drafting of National Adaptation Plans (NAP) to climate change. Although this process is usually led by a state itself, impacts of climate change are transboundary, thus harmonized transboundary adaptation plans between neighbor states assessing the risks and suggesting joint steps would be a form of peacebuilding (Crawford and Church 2020).

Finally, although the decrease in quality or quantity of water in transboundary rivers can be a source of further tensions and conflicts, decades-long political and military tensions have already drained societies on both sides. The transboundary character of rivers meanwhile provides a unique avenue for dialogue and cooperation, even if at initial stages only narrowly specialized experts are involved. Clearly, it will take a long time before a wider process engaging multiple stakeholders begins.

Therefore, to conclude, we propose the following possible activities around which Armenia and Azerbaijan can join efforts and gradually work together for preventing further conflicts as well as for more successfully dealing with the challenge of climate change:

- Create working groups of Armenian and Azerbaijani scientists, with the involvement of foreign experts as mediators, to study and monitor water quantity and quality in transboundary rivers. These

working groups could also work on synchronizing river flow assessment methodologies as well as on assessing the vulnerability of water resources to climate change in transboundary water basins providing more reliable results of hydrological and meteorological data to each other;

- Set up a working group for developing joint approaches in national legislation and water management principles based on the EU Water Framework Directive;
- Develop a joint design of National Adaptation Plans to deal with the regional impacts of climate change;
- Consider a pilot project of exchange water for energy (or for some other commodity) as a platform for cooperation whether in bordering rural communities of the two countries or at the inter-state level;
- Involve all other countries of the Kura-Araks river basin in the cooperation for more sustainable use of water in the region, including through international legal mechanisms, such as the UNECE Water Convention.

The list of interviewees

Abbasov, Rovshan – A leading specialist at a UN Water governance project in Azerbaijan, representative of the Global Alliance for Pollution and Health in Azerbaijan, and the head of the water group at a state program on ecosystems assessment. March 2022.

Bilalova, Shahana – PhD fellow in the NEWAVE project and member of the research group Governance, Participation, and Sustainability at Leuphana University. March 2022.

Mitchell, Jeanene – International development and area studies expert in the South Caucasus and Turkey. March 2022.

Taslakyan, Lusine – Water Management Expert and Doctoral Research Assistant in the Department of Soil and Water Systems at the University of Idaho, USA. February 2022.

Tonoyan, Vahagn – Water Resources Management Expert, MA in International Environmental Policy. February 2022.

Zakaryan, Beniamin – Hydrologist, PhD in Geographical Sciences.
February 2022.

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