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Elitsa Kapusheva, B.A.

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(1) INTRODUCTION

13th of September. Today I wake up a little bit later than usual, I didn't set an alarm. An hour and a half later makes a huge difference – through the open window instead of the early morning coolness slowly come the first signs of the heavy mid-September warmth. While I make coffee, my brain is warming up, and I order by memory the tasks I have for today. I have to go to the city centre for an interview in the late afternoon . I should check my calendar, for when exactly we scheduled the meeting 18:00 or 19:00? Before that I don't have anything else that is urgent, and I'm mostly prepared for the interview, so I can use the morning to deal with some personal admin tasks – check for flights from Yerevan, and prepare some documents. I make two cups of coffee and take mine to the balcony. I sip and snack on a piece of gata, while observing what's going on down on the street. This has become a morning ritual. With September, those morning watch-outs changed. The mornings are busier – children go to school, students go to university, there are more cars using the street as an alternative shortcut to the jammed Komitas Avenue. Today I overslept, so I missed the morning rush, but there are still some dog walkers passing by. At this moment, I am fully absent-minded, embracing the serenity of this routine. My partner joins me quietly with his coffee, sits on the other chair, and checks his phone.

After a while, he disrupts the silence – "They are fighting". Instinctively, I look around, thinking he is talking about quarrelling birds or dogs somewhere down the street out of my line of sight. "Where?"- I ask while still looking around.

"They attacked the border this night, sometime shortly after midnight. And since then, they have been shelling a couple of villages. They are using drones also."

I haven't checked any news, I haven't even opened my phone yet, it's still next to my pillow in the other room. "Any reaction from the peacekeepers?" - I ask.

He looks up from his phone: "It's not in Artsakh. They are shelling Syunik and Gegharkunik."

Suddenly, I'm restless, simultaneously in disbelief, but also thinking about how this has been expected. The more I looked into the situation on the ground and especially with all the talks I've been having, I had no doubts that not only a new major escalation is possible, but that it can happen any time. And yet, I was shocked, because Syunik and Gegharkunik are not Artsakh, this is an attack on the Armenian border, an internationally recognized one. Where was the foreshadowing for this? With the August incidents, and all the praise Aliyev had received from EU officials in the past months, my worry was that something will

happen in Artsakh around 27th of September, to mark a twisted anniversary of the 2020 war. I guess I was subconsciously preparing myself for this scenario.

Change of plans, I will spend the day monitoring different sources and looking to see how what's going on here is covered in international media, if at all.

As the title of the present master thesis lets forefeel, the following text commits itself to an exploration of the notion of self-determination and of the act of exercising it as a (collective) right. Since names are a specific and sensitive issue for the researched context, it is worth mentioning at the very beginning that in the course of the fieldwork, the name of the research project itself underwent major alteration. The final two-component title is intended to streamline the two analytical vantage points, which emerged from being in the field – temporality and processuality. How self-determination epitomises a theoretical and practical contortion is yet to be discussed in more length, but upon this examination it is conspicuous that in addition the notion straddles between disciplines and empirical approaches. This thesis sets itself the objective to study the phenomenon from an anthropological perspective, in which the role of the researcher not only shapes the research process (Hahn, 2013) but also constructs the field, as well as at a later stage *performs* it (Collins & Coleman, 2006: 112). Thus, guiding towards the matter-of-fact, I would like to first touch upon how I became interested in this subject, and what nourished my curiosity despite the manyfold challenges along the way.

The opening vignette is the first half of my field diary entry for the 13th of September. The second half from that day is not at all story-like, personal and emotive, rather it is disordered bullet points mapping out the highlights from what I have seen on the streets and read online that day. Even though this is an excerpt from quite late in the fieldwork, and perhaps jumping directly to this later stage of the research completely disrupts the continuity of how I engaged with this topic in the first place, I attach great value to this episode. The events on the 13th of September were very formative for the tone and the atmosphere in which I had to set the end point of the fieldwork. But even more importantly, this is very indicative of the stalemate circumstances in which the question of self-determination for Artsakh-Armenians persists – a major escalation happens abruptly, yet when the smoke clears somehow there is the overarching feeling that nothing has really changed.

The first time my attention was drawn to the region was in 2016 in the course of a Bachelor's seminar on the politics of Eurasia. What fascinated me the most was the abundance of

similarities that especially Armenia and Georgia share with the Balkans – a region, which owing to my origins had largely shaped my research interests. In the same time, despite the many commonalities, these countries walk their own thorny paths, and for that all attempts to draw general conclusions are challenging, and soon appear to be unproductive. This interest remained latent until 2018, when I was marginally following the little news about Armenia's colour revolution meagrely reaching my newsfeed. After that, my interest gradually increased, and I began following the local developments more closely. When the war in 2020 started, I already had close friends and contacts in Armenia, so I was invested in following the events on the frontline from a distance. It was at this moment when I came head-to-head with a variety of narratives on the right of self-determination and the usage of the notion. For me, it was baffling how self-determination constantly appeared as a leitmotif in official addresses to the international community, in various statements of support or in appeals for international intervention, yet it seemed that beyond talking about it nothing can be done. In the period after the ceasefire agreement confusion and disorder prevailed, and amidst the political turmoil fuelled by people's discontent with the outcomes of the war both Armenia and Artsakh had to face the losses. In this hour of grief, trauma and disappointment, the efforts were directed towards managing and coping with the new reality. The question of self-determination didn't disappear, but for a while faded away, overpowered by more immediate material needs.

I suppose that my anthropological curiosity on how a concept that concerns people so directly is in practice detached from them, took root already during the war, but it was simply not the right timing to intellectualise it. While things were calming down, I began zooming in on self-determination from different angles, in an attempt to penetrate this convoluted notion with the help of anthropological knowledge and trying to understand why it falls short to be put into action and fulfil its purpose.

1.1 Theoretical perspectives and empirical roots

Broadly speaking, with this master's thesis, I set my sight on analysing the right to self-determination through a critical anthropological lens. Self-determination as an anthropological category, however, is if not necessarily ambiguous, then a considerably malleable notion, which can be used as an impetus for understanding agency, identity and

belonging in a variety of social and cultural settings, as well as in differing scales. Among many other strands, anthropologists studied the application of the notion for indigenous peoples and in relation to the self of the researcher (Asch, 2001) or as a crucial juncture of the ethical and unethical in applied research (Castile, 1975). Such accounts despite bringing to the fore productive observations did not provide me with enough substance to understand where the issues with self-determination are rooted in, especially when we approach it as it is coined by international law and the human rights discourse. Therefore, this text spans and links various theoretical aspects bridging anthropological methodology and approaches together with the existing underpinnings from other disciplines to understand the aspiration for self-determination of a collective self in conflict. At a later point, more space will be endowed for the discussion of each of these central theoretical reference points. For now, in order to paint a better picture of where this research is theoretically situated or, as the case may be, what theoretical path this research elapsed, in this section I will briefly summarise the theoretical scaffolding and how synchronously it is an outgrowth of the empirical context.

Since my interest towards self-determination as a subject of anthropological inquiry stemmed from the war that took place in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, it was only logical to base the research into the notion on a case study of Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. Choosing to focus on this case study and conduct fieldwork in the context of a frozen conflict and an unstable ceasefire, meant that the frame of mind with which I was to carry out the analysis was forged in the shadow of peace and conflict research. Although the preliminary research and the fieldwork did not take place in the immediate conflict zone or during an active phase of the conflict, this precondition had its inevitable impacts on the theoretical fringes that eventually ended up pulling themselves through the final results of the research.

In the last three decades, anthropology of human rights has been undergoing a shift towards an increasing and more critical engagement with the human rights discourse. Notably, this shift is either reflexively revising the legacy of earlier stances of the discipline or probing into the concept of universal human rights en masse as a contradiction to cultural diversity, and as an attempt to exercise a new form of hegemony tailored for the postcolonial world order (Preis, 1996; Goodale, 2006). These debates elicited a plethora of further anthropological studies devoted to untangling concrete aspects of the spectrum of human rights. Though the case be such, the studies I have encountered investigate the respective specific issues of human rights

either from the perspective of a clearly defined group – e.g. women and girls, children, indigenous people, LGBTQIA+, etc.; or as a right for access towards a clearly defined *something* – water, land, representation. On the contrary, self-determination of peoples, in its twofold meaning as a principle of international law and as a human right, is charged with abstractness, and this could be why it remained in the periphery of anthropological discussions of human rights. Therefore, I approach the topic from outside the anthropological scope, to understand the core of the collective self-determination conundrum in intersection with conflict, secession, and aspirations for independence. From this groundwork, the inquiry into self-determination will branch out into three theoretical directions. Whereas, these three directions are devised in accordance with the research question and the distinctive empirical context, and allow for a multi-angled anthropological embeddedness.

The first outlook on the notion touches upon the significance of the specific temporality in which the pursuit of self-determination materialises. The temporality in this case of Artsakh and Armenia is narrated as an overarching uncertainty. The idea of uncertainty overlaps with the classical anthropological concepts of *liminality* and *stage of limbo*. The phrase *rites of passage* was first introduced by Arnold Van Gennep (1960) as a concept to understand transitional stages, which individuals and groups have to undergo in the course of their lives. Initially, Van Gennep associates these transformations with significant life milestones such as entering adulthood through puberty, marriage, death, or other life crises and looks at the process of transition as an extended ritual consisting of three stages: rites of separation, rites of liminality and rites of incorporation (Van Gennep, 1960: 11). Commencing from this theory, in a later seminal work, Victor W. Turner takes interest particularly in the stage of liminality – a state of ambiguity and being in-between what is definite, looking into liminal people, entities, and spaces (Turner, 1977/1969: 95). The stage of limbo is the recent, more transdisciplinary addition to this chain of notion. It allows for an extensive reflection on the periods of social and cultural transition and enables scaling up the analytical capacity of liminality to crises and events of rupture or change that affect not only individuals or a small groups, but appear on a larger societal level.

Uncertainty – in this case the uncertainty of the ceasefire – is not simply a benevolent ambience but has relentless impacts on the life of people. In order to understand how they cope with it and how this act of coping is related to self-determination, next is to bring up the theory of practice. The *social practice* of Bourdieu (1977) challenges the omnipotence of the structure

by vesting agency in the individual. The logic of Bourdieu's practice also reinforces the prominence of temporality because:

> Practice unfolds in time and it has all the correlative properties, such as irreversibility, that synchronization destroys. Its temporal structure, that is, its rhythm, its tempo, and above all its directionality, is constitutive of its meaning. (Bourdieu, 1992: 81)

In this research, social practices are viewed in conjunction with resilience. Although it is another multifunctional notion that has gained immense traction in social sciences, *resilience* provides an avenue to rethink the social robustness of people in conflict. Resilient social units become resilient in the face of particular challenging conditions, and develop knowledge and skills in response to those challenges (Bollig, 2014: 264). If we look not only at war and conflict but at self-determination as one such challenge itself, the concept of resilience provides an interesting perspective to understand people's actions on the ground.

The final theoretical straw brings together the aspects of temporality and processuality by looking closer into the unfolding of a process of identity negotiation between the different actors as part of the process of self-determination. The main focus of identity negotiation theory is how sociocultural group membership and individual identity struggles shape the interpersonal dynamics (Ting-Toomey, 2015). This vantage point allows examining how the different identities constituting the collective self struggling for self-determination make and unmake themselves to contribute to the collective pursuit. These theoretical perspectives and the linkages between them demarcate the knowledge space in which I pursued the central research question.

1.2 Research question

My initial bewilderment with the notion of self-determination originated from the contradiction that during the time of the 2020 war, despite the abundance of self-determination narratives (often coming from above and outside and not necessarily always in favour of the concept) that could be found in the vast mediascape of the conflict, these narratives, mostly rang hollow. Hence, at the preliminary stage of the literature review, my main interest was to unearth from below the personal narratives of self-determination of the people in Artsakh and Armenia. So, I began organising the research around the hypothesis that instead of looking at

self-determination as a linear sequence of claim and recognition (or rejection of recognition) between clear-cut groups of actors, there is a strong analytical potential to acknowledge self-determination as a continuous process of negotiation and reclaiming of identity. Especially in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a process-oriented approach allows delving deeper into the struggles for self-determination, as well as to take into account the shifting roles and agency throughout the history of the conflict. With this hypothesis my idea was not to dismantle the top-down perspective on self-determination, after all the idea of self-determination of peoples as a human right was not conceived in the grassroots, and the top-down viewpoint lays the theoretical foundations. Neither, I wanted to contrast top-down and bottom-up narratives, because naturally if not opposing these narratives would be remarkably different from one another, simply due to the variety of personal experiences of the conflict, expectations for its resolution and level of personal involvement. Instead, I thought that looking into it as a collective process composed of the individual experiences of (conflict-affected) people can open up new perspectives on how to interpret and rejuvenate the notion, so that it can be utilised in its full capacity in practice. As a result, the central research question that guided the research was:

How is self-determination understood, experienced and talked about by people in their everyday life, and in what ways the unceasing process of self-determination for Artsakh substantiates through personal narratives the identity negotiation of (Artsakh-)Armenians?

In addition, while preparing for the field work, I have outlined the following complementary questions to help guide my way throughout the encounters in the field:

- In what form/ wording is self-determination present and talked about, historically and as an aspect of the present?
- How do thoughts about self-determination and independence are mirrored in and in turn being mirrored (if at all) within representations of collective identity?
- How do those personal narratives illustrate the attachment to disputed/ unrecognised space and displacement?

In the course of the fieldwork the emphasis of the main research question slightly transformed, and alongside a new set of additional questions emerged. This was mainly a consequence of two factors. First, it was difficult to facilitate a conversation that centrally revolved around past experiences. In the cases in which I spoke with people who were directly affected by the war in 2020, after some deliberation I decided to shift the focus to present day experiences and thoughts, after I realised that I am not confident enough in my ability to handle a conversation about traumatic life experiences. Secondly, the pool of my interlocutors ended up with a more diverse background than it was intended in the initial research design. The impact of this demographic diversity is to be discussed more broadly in the section below, but for now it is to be noted that as a result I had to broaden up my understanding of varying positions and attitudes. At the same time, the emphasis on narratives gradually faded, offset by accounts on past and current actions, while the theme of *resilience* emerged as a prevalent walk through to grasping self-determination. This prompted the most significant change in the core research question, namely, to use it to focus on practices of resilience instead of directly inquiring in narratives of self-determination. In this regard, to the list of supplementary queries, I added the following:

- How is resilience understood?
- How resilience and self-determination interact in the collective mind?
- How does the paradigm of uncertainty shape the importance of *actions*?
- What are the commonplace attitudes towards the future of Artsakh in the different groups of Armenians?

1.3 Field research

This research project was envisioned as an empirical exploration that bridges the theory of self-determination with the lived experiences on the ground. Fortunately, I was able to maintain and realise this core epistemic objective thanks to the scholarship programme for short-term research abroad funded by the University of Vienna. In the summer of 2022, from late June to the end of September, I conducted 3 months of fieldwork in Armenia. During the preliminary planning phase, after thoroughly considering a series of feasibility issues, I have

narrowed down the scope of the research, settling on doing fieldwork only on the territory of Armenia. I was primarily located in Yerevan, but the empirical material was collected from research activities in Yerevan and the nearby town of Hrazdan.

1.3.1 Challenges in the field

Before moving to the discussion of the selected methodological approaches, I want to flag up some challenges I encountered during the research process, which made me reflect on and rethink the operational parameters laid out in the proposed research design. Acknowledging these challenges (not only for the sake of reflexivity) is important, as they propelled ad hoc adaptations, which in turn reshaped the outcome of the research and the direction of the analysis.

As per common advice, I began with carefully planning a clear project timeline and fitting research strategies that will enable me to go after the research questions in a structured and manageable manner (Johnson & Hruschka, 2014: 97-98). At the same time, again as per the common advice of my teachers, I was prepared to be observant, receptive, and flexible towards change and any possible detours from the original plan, since fieldwork regardless how well pre-planned can be extremely unpredictable. Eventually, the biggest challenge turned out to be gaining and maintaining access to a concrete research site for the entire duration of the fieldwork. The main group identified as central research partners and informants, outlined in the initial concept, were people displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh currently residing in Armenia, without setting any specifications if the displacement took place before, during or after the 2020 war, as their lives, past, present, and future are most directly affected by the conflict and by association by the idea of the right to self-determination.

Prior to starting the research on the ground, I have already been to Armenia and established some useful contacts. To gain access to displaced people and communities, in February 2022 I began mapping potential access points, focusing my attention primarily on branches of international organisations that work with this affected population. I anticipated that international organisations would be more responsive towards an inquiry for a collaboration from a foreign researcher, and eventually will be open to discuss a format in which I can join them to observe/ participate in their work on the ground. Throughout February and March, I initiated first contact via email. My requests for cooperation were either politely denied or were left without a reply. I continued mapping out potential research partners, also with the help and suggestions of

my personal contacts in Armenia, however, the subsequent attempts in April and May to get in contact were also fruitless. The process of establishing contact was, in my opinion, impeded by a couple of factors. First, the sensitivity of the topic, especially regarding the selected target group and the possible social and political implications of being linked to research that considers the right to self-determination of a de facto state. Second, I came "out of nowhere" and despite what I have laid out in my written requests, my *authentic* intentions remained unknown in the correspondence. In the context of a frozen conflict, where suspicion often takes over interactions with unknown and unfamiliar newcomers, I can imagine why my requests for collaboration, coming "out of nowhere", were met with reluctance. Third, and this is something I would realise later in the course of the fieldwork, my timing simply wasn't right. Under the circumstances of the uncertainty of the ceasefire impending over the collective security and seeping through into individual daily activities, me writing a couple of months before physically being in Yerevan, trying to negotiate a (fairly) longitudinal collaboration in advance, could hardly work.

Once my arrival neared, I re-approached those organisations, which, despite averting my requests to accompany them in their work, had previously shown some interest in the research. This time I asked them for an interview and some of them agreed to meet with me. Although I was met with extreme hospitality and my interview partners were very interested, and open to talk with me, there was a certain degree of (contradicting) suspiciousness in this communication with experts. They would answer my questions and share valuable insights from their experience working during and after the war, but they wouldn't let me get closer to their work, particularly to the non-expert sides of it. These introductory expert interviews were not only informational, but were also very useful for networking. Although the organisations continued to be reluctant to let me bind my research with their work, they forwarded me to further contacts, which later became interlocutors. In the light of this experience, I adjusted my guiding strategy. Instead of trying to arrange a single research setting for the entire duration of my fieldwork, I opted for respondent driven sampling, i.e. the snowballing technique. So, the expert interviews became the seeds, which helped me recruit the next set of (peer-) participants (Guest, 2014: 213). Choosing this technique meant that I also had to broaden the scope of my study population (ibid.: 216). But relying on the rationale of the social connections as an underlying element to the process of respondent-to-respondent recommendation, I was positive that the snowballing technique will lead me to relevant stakeholders (ibid.: 217).

This major adjustment, however, prompted me to re-investigate how exactly I define the *research site* within this newly reshaped context. The fieldwork was taking place in Armenia, it started from Yerevan, and I considered and hoped for an opportunity that my emerging respondent network will lead me elsewhere. But Yerevan altogether was definitely not my field site, and neither would have been any other village, town or settlement where I potentially could have been introduced to. Already in the mid 90s, George E. Marcus challenged the idea of *the* ethnographic field site, arguing that there are research contexts, subjects, and social phenomena, which are difficult to study from a wide angle, if the ethnographic exploration is confined to a single field site (Marcus, 1995: 99-100). Marcus rethinks the ethnographic approach as an ethnography in a world system, which is multi-local and multi-contextual, hence requires a multi-sited approach (ibid.: 97). Once the idea gained traction, and settled in the collective practice, Falzon et al. (Falzon (Ed.), 2009b) picked up the baton and continued the process of developing and refining the multi-sited approach for contemporary research. He writes that in its core multi-sited research "is to follow people, connections, associations, and relationships across space (because they are substantially continuous but spatially non-contiguous)" (Falzon, 2009: 1-2). In this sense, conceiving my fieldwork as doing a multi-sited ethnography, helped me manage and make sense of the changing dynamics of connection and communication. Rather than binding the fieldwork to a clear-cut field site, I regarded the interactions with individuals or clusters of interlocutors[1] as different sites on their own. The multi-sitedness was fully fleshed out by the identities and characters of my research partners, who with their diverse life courses, really materialised the idea of different sites, spatially non-continuous but continuously sense-making. Notably, there is one significant difference in how I apply the multi-sited approach, and how it was imagined in the first place. Both Marcus and Falzon discuss multi-sited ethnography partially as a response to an expanding global system and the ruptures in the local that cause the anthropological practice to adapt. My research is multi-sited, but it is certainly not multi-local. The reason for this is that for Armenians self-determination as a right, a dream, a disappointment, a practice, a process etc, is localised. In a sense, in the sites that I explore, the multiplicity – physical, narrated, in different place and time – created and embodied by my

[1] Here I refer to clusters of informants not in the sense of cluster sampling where groups of interlocutors are considered as a single unit (Guest, 2014: 231), but as clusters in the population united by specific demographic characteristics that impact their social, economic, political, and cultural positions and views. Particularities of these clusters in the context of the research will be discussed below.

interlocutors and the interactions with them ends up (re-)producing the same locality (Appadurai, 1996: 180), i.e. the locality of a self-determined Artsakh.

1.3.2 Methodology

After we have established the two essential pillars that uphold the framework of my approach, namely the respondent driven/snowball sampling technique and the multi-sited ethnography, let us have a closer look at the full set of methods employed for the detailed analysis of the research subject. The research questions and the paths towards possible answers are examined in the intersection of purposely selected qualitative methods, or as commonly referred to in social research through a process of triangulation that enables obtaining, comparing and confirming data from multiple sources (Trotter et al., 2014: 683). The following methods come under the core set of empirical methodologies, which helped me capture a comprehensive picture of the sentiments and experience relating to the notion of self-determination: (participant) observations and participant observations in events; expert, narrative and *collaborative* interviews; and since informal encounters and interactions emerged as a source for valuable inputs, also the approach of anthropology on foot (Ingold & Lee, 2006; Ingold & Vergunst, 2008). In the course of the fieldwork, I have taken extensive field notes and kept a field diary for reflection. Last but not least, a competent, considerate and attentive acquisition of empirical data wouldn't have been possible without meticulous secondary research and media discourse analysis.

The analysis of secondary and tertiary literature, international documents, archives, and other relevant written and visual sources is in reality the backbone for the research. The secondary research and the depth and width of thought that it generates, provide the solid foundation for carrying out the fieldwork efficiently, transparently and with more reflexivity (Thin, 2013). To the secondary research, I also count the extensive media discourse analysis of social and digital media, although it is commonly considered as a separate approach on its own (Akkaya, 2014). Monitoring and engaging with the verbal and visual discussions unfolding in the online media environments, allowed me to contextualize better the research, the theoretical perspectives and the empirical data against the public narratives and attitudes. It is not easy to clearly disconnect the secondary research and the media discourse analysis from the empirical

phase. The former was more of a circular process, and often events in the field would prompt me to revisit secondary sources or return to the ongoing discussions and information flows online.

Given the fact that fieldwork was navigated as multi-sited, there was no particular place to enter from or anchor my observations. Nevertheless, participant observation is an essential qualitative research method for ethnographers, one that enables being with the research subject, while situating myself and my work better in the context (Emerson et al., 1995). Moreover, it is an important tool of practice in situ as:

> […] it enhances the quality of the data obtained during fieldwork. Second, it enhances the quality of the interpretation of data, whether those data are collected through participant observation or by other methods. Participant observation is thus both a data collection and an analytic tool. (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011: 10)

I conducted observations in public spaces that were used at different times for varying forms of collective *mobilization*. At the time of the fieldwork, protests, rallies, and campaigns for signature collection for petitions in support of Artsakh took place, and following the September attacks there were collection points for donations for the army. These instances were a great opportunity to observe behaviours and interactions, but notably during these events I was more of an observer than a participant (Fontein, 2013: 75). Parallel to the common yet ad hoc *happenings* on the streets, I participated in a couple events, which with their topics, structures, and mode of organization gave me a different set of valuable perspectives. I attended a book presentation, photography exhibition, and a film screening with a subsequent discussion, and I took part in a conference and two workshops, all of which were somehow related to the topic of Nagorno-Karabakh, the conflict and the struggle for self-determination. The first workshop examined the future of Artsakh in terms of security, development and human well-being, while the other – evaluated efforts for humanitarian support for Artsakh-Armenians relocated to Armenia after the war and mapping out future strategies. I used these opportunities to practice participant observation in event settings, which allowed me to develop a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) based on the conference and workshops activities and objectives, and the expectations and reactions they incite in the participants. Alongside these more obvious (participant) observation opportunities, I also took advantage of my daily mobility. I treated walks to and from appointments and meetings, bus rides, travelling by shared taxi to the town of

Hrazdan to conduct interviews and participant observations, as instances of observations "on foot" that provide unexpected opportunities and interlocutors to explore and reflect on the research (Ingold & Lee, 2006).

The other key technique to collect empirical data was conducting interviews. Due to the diverse backgrounds of my interlocutors and their varying social positions, I used three different interviewing approaches. The first couple of interviews were conducted with representatives of non-governmental organizations, who I approached in our preliminary correspondence as experts, and they re-asserted themselves as such. Our conversations took place in the format of semi-structured expert interviews, for which I have provided an interview guide prior to the appointment. Inasmuch as the contact with these experts, and respectively the interviewing technique, aimed at collecting information about their work on the ground following the 2020 war and their assessment of the current situation, these aspects were highlighted in the list of interview questions (Gläser & Laudel, 2010: 91). Despite that the general course of the conversations was guided by these questions, the interviews were still a process of reciprocal communication (ibid.: 111), and there was freedom to ask for clarifications from both sides. As already noted, the expert interviews did not only provide some informative grounds for the next phases of the fieldwork, but also served as the starting point for the peer to peer recommendation. Moving out of the expert circle, with the interlocutors who were introduced to me as non-expert stakeholders, I conducted unstructured narrative interviews. Narrative interviews focus on the individual and their personal experiences. "The purpose of a narrative interview is to encourage the interviewee to produce long narrations, embedded in an autonomous presentation relating to a certain topic" (Rosenthal, 2018; 133) and indeed studying self-determination through narrative interviews allows zooming into how people have experienced and relate to the notion. For planning and carrying out these interviews, as well as to help me develop rapport (Schensul et al., 2014: 196) and to navigate the process, I used Fritz Schütze's scheme for narrative interviewing as it is operationalized by Bauer and Gaskell (2000). Finally, some of my interview partners occupied a so to say "liminal" position. Because of their professional background, they could be considered as experts on the topic, but have not asserted themselves unequivocally as such when we first got in contact. Yet during the preliminary informal conversations I noticed that their insights intertwine, and a very personal experience would be followed by expert observations/interpretations. In an attempt to fully

acknowledge their personal and expert experience, I experimented with collaborative interviewing techniques. In these cases, I would start with an open-ended question as I would during a narrative interview, but I would embrace moments in which expert knowledge transpires as opportunities to discuss more critically, for them to elaborate professionally, and reflect on my prompts.

My observations, impressions, on spot interpretations, and afterthoughts following the interviews were collected in the field notes, which together with the field diary in which I reflected on my personal (dis-)positions in the field, served as scaffolding and memos during the process of sorting out, systematizing and processing the data (Emerson et al., 1995).

1.3.3 Silhouettes of my interlocutors – why does it matter?

Identifying who exactly were my interlocutors, or rather in what clusters of likeness they render themselves be grouped, is in my opinion imperative to understand the variety of positional perspectives that come together in this text. Had my research been, as initially designed, primarily focused on displaced and relocated persons from Artsakh, then the present section should have paid closer attention to the specificities of migration from Artsakh to Armenia, especially after November 2020, and particularly the state of being displaced *among one's own*. Due to the challenges described above and the decision to shift to respondent driven sampling, my pool of interlocutors diverted from the pulling force of displacement as a unifying predicament. The theme of displacement continued to be present, but it became one aspect of a many, from what I would provisionally refer to as an axis of Armenian identities. Here identities in plural are neither to be understood as the building blocks of national identity, nor in the sense of Levon Abrahmian's intriguing metaphor as paths that are collectively trodden, explored and (re-)visited to create the garden of Armenian identity (Abrahamian, 2006). Instead, with the idea of an axis of identities, I want to outline the variety of social positions from which people approach and make sense of their Armenian-ness and Artsakh's self-determination. I should also emphasize that these "silhouettes" or group portraits are very conditional and are in reality much more complex and iridescent. So, the differentiation below is used as a tool to describe and navigate the differences and commonalities in the backgrounds of my interlocutors, which in turn helps to bring more clarity in the analysis.

First, perhaps the easiest to distinguish are Armenians from Armenia – the people who are born and raised in Armenia, and whose professional and personal development for the most part took place in the country. For the interlocutors from this group it is not an exception to have lived shortly abroad, usually for study or work purposes, but these experiences, although formative, have not affected in any major way how they relate to being Armenian. The next group are Artsakh-Armenians – those are people who were born in Artsakh, grew up there and lived there for most of their lives, this includes also villages and towns in the territories that were ceded to Azerbaijan after the war. In the context of the research, the stories of relocation to Armenia follow different trajectories and there are also contrasts regarding what connections and access they still have to Artsakh following the war and after moving to Armenia more permanently. Important is that these people put great emphasis and are proud of being Artsakhtsi. The third group that can be differentiated are members of the Armenian diaspora. When we speak of diaspora, there are additional layers of complexity, since Armenian diaspora is among the largest worldwide (Buchholz, 2022). However, statistical figures often do not reflect historical waves and flows of migration and the ratio between diaspora and the population living in the country, which are important elements to consider due to their impact on the structure and heritage of Armenian diaspora and the relationship they have with Armenia today. Even when Armenian communities are well integrated in the host countries, the connection to the heritage and their Armenian identity persists through language, religion, and culture (Al-Rustom, 2013). The Armenian diaspora is at the same time very politically engaged with *Armenian causes* and mobilizes great efforts to support those (Bolsajian, 2018). Nonetheless, the diaspora is not a monolith. There are intergenerational differences, as well as inevitably the culture of the host country plays a significant role in shaping the characteristics of the different Armenian communities across the map. In the context of my research, I met with two types of Dispora-Armenians. The first one is individuals who live abroad, varying from 1st to 3rd generation migrants, who have strong connections with Armenia and support initiatives and projects that aim to address issues in Armenia and Artsakh. However, at the time of the interviews, they had no intention to return to Armenia permanently. The second type I interacted with are (potential) repatriates, all of whom were born and raised abroad, and in the case of the research coming from the USA and Canada. I spoke with people, who have already relocated to Armenia and with people who are planning to move or are in the process of moving to live and

work in Armenia. They also are actively engaged in different initiatives that support causes in Armenia and Artsakh. Finally, the fourth category that I would include to this axis, albeit with a question mark, are non-Armenians who strongly empathize with the history of Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Interestingly, my research met me with a couple of individuals who fit this description, and they as well were involved in different projects aiming to raise awareness about the struggles on the ground.

In the context of the conflict and the movement for self-determination of Artsakh, these groups are affected differently, but are all mobilized in some way. And I find this to be a particularly interesting aspect to track down. There is already plenty of research on diaspora mobilisation and how their sociospatial positionality shapes their politics (Koinova, 2017), but diaspora is not mobilising in a vacuum. It is part of a broader network of groups, communities and individuals, who – yes, have a lot in common; but who are also fundamentally different in terms of the sociopolitical environments and the material conditions that back them up. This is why I think it is important to enter the discussion with these rough and quite simplified categories in mind. The exploration of how self-determination is experienced, thought and spoken of draws from the insights of people from all four groups, which provides for an interesting multi-angled deep dive in the subject.

1.4 Some necessary reflections on choices

Choice of names

When I first took up the idea for this research, within myself, I had no doubt or restraints regarding the use of Artsakh interchangeably with Nagorno-Karabakh[2]. At the same time, I was fully aware that in the context of an unrecognised state, this intentional choice might be contested and criticised. The relationships between names and identity are complex, and even

[2] For a detailed overview of the etymology, the history and respectively the establishment of the use of both Artsakh and Nagorno-Karabakh see:

On Origins of Geographic Term 'Karabakh.' (2017, March 13). USC Dornsife Institute for Armenian Studies. Retrieved August 10, 2023, from https://armenian.usc.edu/on-origins-of-geographic-term-karabakh/

Stepan-Sarkissian, G. (2020, October 2). *ARTSAKH / NAGORNO-KARABAKH: A BRIEF HISTORY | Part 1*. Armenian Institute. Retrieved August 10, 2023, from https://www.armenianinstitute.org.uk/viewstext/artsakh-part1

more complexity is added when we try to discern the convoluted relationships between toponyms, disputed territories, and conflicting identities in crisis. Opting for the Armenian toponym Artsakh, instead of sticking strictly to the commonly used and thus considered neutral Nagorno-Karabakh, might appear as a biased approach. But it was an important distinction to be made on my side, both for the purposes of studying self-determination, and for establishing relationships in the field.

> Name and place belong together, regardless of how the name is formed etymologically. The name is a key to memories and experiences. To be familiar with the same name is to know a little about each other. Names are social signals of solidarity. The more names one shares with others, the stronger the solidarity with them is. (Huldén, 1994, as cited in Helleland, 2012: 96)

In this case, not so much the personal but the collective identity is bound to the place and to the name Artsakh, and hence how the space Artsakh is grounded in the collective consciousness (Tilley, 1994: 15). Yet the toponym Artsakh is not only an expression of the attachment to the place or of a consolidated collective identity, but also it provides a means to voice politically, internally and outwardly[3], the claim for self-determination. By sharing the name Artsakh with its attached historical, social, political, cultural and psychological values I am able to come closer to my interlocutors' memories, experiences, reflections, and thoughts for the future, that compose their relationships to the place Artsakh and sustain, or fail to do so, the aspiration for self-determination.

On the other hand, I don't adhere to using only Artsakh. Contrary to the anticipation that people favour place names that are consistent and permanent (Helleland, 2012: 98) or that the name is a "durable national symbol" (Saparov, 2003: 179), my research partners freely use Artsakh, Nagorno-Karabakh, or simply Gharabagh interchangeably. In the course of our conversations, the different choices of place names seemed unconscious and situational, and importantly determined by the different life trajectories and intersecting identities of the individual research partners. But after a closer look, this variance of usage is illustrative of the different reference points (temporal, spatial, social) through which the place Artsakh and its

[3] In 2017, the de facto Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh held a constitutional referendum, in the result of which the name was officially changed to Republic of Artsakh.

striving community is reconstructed at the moment of speaking, and with regard to the subject of exchange. Moreover, the assemblage of names points out different time periods, contextualises the narrative in time, but also ties it to traumatic personal and collective experiences, which alter the position of the speaker in the present. Both verbally in my conversations and encounters in the field, and here in written form, I follow the suit of my research partners. Unless historically necessary, there is no blueprint of when to use which toponym in the text, in my interpretation I use them as they come and as they were referred to by my interlocutors in the relevant for the analysis fragments.

Choice of anonymization

At this point I want to address the ethical aspect of confidentiality and pseudonymisation, which is standard procedure in social sciences, and was also something I puzzled over how to approach in practice, and how to communicate to my interlocutors. Generally speaking, this research project adheres to the seven principles of professional responsibility of the American Anthropological Association (AAA, n.d.) and the Guidelines of Ethical Research of the faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Vienna (*Forschungsethik*, n.d.). Although these sources provide a substantial framework for ethical conduct and research integrity, they are rather vague when it comes to offering concrete advice on how to handle particular methodological dilemmas in the field. What is more, every research context bears its own ethical concerns and requirements (Harper, 2013), which in its turn necessitates the researcher to be reflective and intentional with their choices at every stage of the research.

My subjective concern regarding the practice of en masse anonymisation of interlocutor's accounts is that by hiding their identity I take away part of their agency, and distance them from their contributions, reducing them to the role of data providers. As if hiding the faces of my interlocutors behind vague demographic indicators was fiddling towards a subtle quantification of the gathered materials (Merry, 2016), which subsequently bears the risk to flatten out the nuance and depoliticize those accounts. My dilemma was additionally fed by the topic of the research project. On the one hand, researching the notion of self-determination as an individual experience and collective process, also meant that I could provide a platform for insights outside the echo chamber of social media. This aspect of the dilemma affects the matter of recognition. When recognition is so closely tied to the challenges inherent to self-determination, can the

default disguise of the identities of my research partners be perceived as another act of dismissal of their positions and voices to be recognized, albeit at small-scale? On the other hand, with the broader research context in mind, I have to ensure that if eventually any results of my work become publicly available, they won't turn into a springboard for harassment. The nature of the social media discourse surrounding the current situation between Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Azerbaijan is such that statements from this text can easily be used to intimidate and pester people online, this includes not only my interlocutors, but also me as the author. And although this is an academic text, knowing and following the media scape of the conflict for over 3 years, I don't rule out the possibility that eventually it can draw this type of unwanted attention. Such misuse can come from both sides of the Twitter/Telegram "barricades" – from Armenians who call for a more tangible support instead of academic writings that don't have a wide reach; and from Azerbaijani pro-government and anti-Armenian social media crowd that takes every opportunity to smear anyone 'beguiled' by the "Armenian propaganda machine".

After some thought about how to navigate the situation, I settled on the approach to give my interlocutors the opportunity to decide for themselves the degree to which the information they share will be anonymised/ pseudonymised in the text. This was integrated in the bilingual (Armenian and English) informed consent form. At the beginning of each interview the interlocutors were introduced to the topic and the aims of the research, they were given a rough overview of how our conversation will flow, and finally, they were asked to choose from one of three options for confidentiality: full anonymisation, partial anonymisation, or not to use pseudonyms. As I came in contact with many of the interviewees through different organisations and initiatives working with vulnerable populations and sensitive issues, I also had to take into account that there might be some reservations with regard to the organisation being mentioned in the research. Therefore, the option for full anonymisation stood for both the identity of the interlocutor and the organisation to remain confidential in the text. As previously mentioned, some of my interview partners had a double status, although speaking to me privately they could still be considered as experts, and in the course of the conversation they would often change hats. For such instances, I proposed the option of partial anonymisation – the identity of the person remains confidential, but if relevant I may refer to the organisation they work with or vice versa. Surprisingly, having the option to choose between partial and no pseudonymisation helped those interlocutors with a twofold expert/non-expert role to more easily identify from which position

they are talking to me. The third option – no pseudonymisation – indicated that if excerpts from our conversation end up quoted in the text, I will refer to the person's first name.

With this in mind, the strategy I have adopted to render their choices of confidentiality in written form is to use an asterisk for visual indication – the names followed by an asterisk signify that the person's name has been changed and some details of their background will be obscured according to their wishes. Lastly, I adopt this approach with the intention to revisit and reflect further on it at a future stage of my career (Vorhölter, 2021: 31).

1.5 Outline of the thesis

By now it is obvious that the architecture of the thesis deviates from the classic four-act structure: literature review, methodology, empirical findings, and discussion, expected for a Master's thesis. This choice is motivated by the idea of imagining ethnographic fieldwork as a distinctive rite of passage for young researchers (Fontein, 2013: 56). Despite the fact that this idea is commonly discussed in the course of my training in anthropology, amidst this research I began looking at it with fresh pair of eyes. Although I have already had some experience with field research outside the university setting, the scope and duration of this project were unprecedented for me, and for the first time I was to conduct research entirely on my own. With this in mind, I ruminated that the rite of passage is not merely entrance to the field and reflection in hindsight (Chughtai & Myers, 2016). For an anthropologist in-the-making like me the closure of this transition, i.e. the stage of return, does not correspond to the moment of returning from "the field". A significant part of this passage continues to unfold during the writing-up. That is why I was eager to use this opportunity to experiment with the writing styles and composition. Thereupon, this thesis ultimately morphs between the academic format and an exercise for a captivating ethnographic writing.

At the risk of the introduction becoming a bit bulky and content heavy, the overview of the methodological approach and mapping of the fieldwork were included in the present establishing section. Subsequently, the thesis consists of four chapters, each engaging with one particular theoretical aspect following the order presented above, that serves as a backdrop for the discussion of the relevant empirical findings. Perhaps only the first chapter departs slightly from this logic – there I examine more broadly the theory of self-determination, the history of the

notion and the innate contradictions, and the literature review aspect prevails over the discussion of insights from the field. Nonetheless, it is an attempt to approach the analysis of these theoretical entanglements proceeding from the contradictions expressed by my interlocutors. The second chapter deals with the paradigm of uncertainty, perceived as so widespread that it has social, economic, cultural, political and moral manifestations. In chapter 3, by means of the accounts of my research partners, we will scrutinise self-determination as a practice of resilience. Lastly, in chapter 4, I will engage in a more detailed elaboration on how the process of self-determination is intertwined with the process of identity negotiation for Armenians, Artsakh-Armenians and Diaspora-Armenians.

Each of the main sections in the thesis is connected to the next one with the help of an interlude. The idea of interludes as a storytelling device is borrowed from Nikhil Anand's (2017) ethnography *Hydraulic City*, in which he uses these breaks from the main text to provide additional information or as spaces for reflection. Drawing inspiration from this work, here I employ the interlude with the purpose to provide more context and nuance for the reader. Some interludes equip the readers with knowledge to familiarise themselves with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. While others provide a space for reflection on my positionality in interactions with people and places.

In conclusion, alongside the summary of the key findings, I will reflect on the relevance of these newly generated interpretations and how they interact with the developments in Armenia and Artsakh after the end of the fieldwork.

Where does the question of self-determination for the people of Artsakh fit in the puzzle of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict? The answer to this question can provide some necessary background for understanding when and where this research takes place in the timeline of the conflict. However, it is quite a challenge to keep it concise, since the current complexity of the conflict rests on layers of historical and political developments.

Most commonly the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is described as yet another regional conflict in the *tumultuous South-Caucasus*, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union; as a territorial dispute; or as a century-old ethnoreligious conflict between Christian Armenians and Muslim Turkic Azeri, which carried over to the present day. In the same breath, I can agree that all of the above are true and argue that none of the above are true. To contest these routes of *defining* the conflict will be too big of a deviation from the main topic, so for now let's side with the idea that all three perspectives are valid to a degree. To outline the backdrop for this study, I will focus on the period from 1988 to the present day and single out four episodes, which mark the most significant aggravations of violence and political change. My choice of a starting point for this overview can be disputed. Admittedly, wherever I choose to begin there can be critique why I haven't zoomed in even further back in history, or the contrary – why I don't rewind only the most recent events, as they have the most immediate influence over the current situation in Armenia and Artsakh. Given the fact that self-determination is in the spotlight of this exploration, 1988, the year in which the Karabakh Movement was officially consolidated, is the logical point of departure.

With the sovietization, despite that the majority of the population was Armenian, according to official census data about 88% in 1959 (Soviet Union Census, 1959) and 84% in 1970 (Soviet Union Census, 1970), Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) became part of Azerbaijan SSR. During the Soviet period up to the late 80s, tensions between Armenians living in Azerbaijan SSR continued to take place (Anderson, 1977), and there were multiple attempts to unite NKAO with Armenia. These attempts were finally channelled into a united collective effort in February 1988, following a year of increasing pressure over NKAO-Armenians from Azerbaijani central power. First Stepanakert, the capital of NKAO, quickly followed by Yerevan, were swept by rallies with thousands of demonstrators calling for

the USSR to transfer NKAO to Armenia (De Waal, 2013). The February demonstrations ignited the idea of a consolidated movement, but they also triggered the already burgeoning anti-Armenian sentiments in the territory of Azerbaijan SSR, leading to the Sumgait Pogroms that took place on 27th and 28th of February (Libaridian, 1988: 104-105). The violence witnessed during the Sumgait Pogroms was the final straw, and on March 2-3 1988 the Karabakh Committee was established, which initiated a wave of mobilisation and de-centralized activities (see Smbatyan, 2022). In nearly two years, the Karabakh Movement operated amidst worsening tensions and against the backdrop of a steadily destabilising USSR. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, one by one the former Soviet Republics started breaking away – Armenia declared independence in 1990, Azerbaijan's independence followed in 1991. A few days after Azerbaijan's declaration of independence, NKAO declared itself independent, and thus becoming the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (NKR). The declaration of independence was actualized with the referendum on independence that took place on December 10th 1991, with an almost absolute majority of 99.98% voting for Nagorno-Karabakh to be an independent state (*Berg-Karabach (Aserbaidschan), 10. Dezember 1991 : Unabhängigkeit*, n.d.).

The referendum turned out to be the point of no return, and its results became the catalyst of a full-scale war. The first Nagorno-Karabakh war lasted until May 1994. In the span of almost three years, this scathing war resulted in an enormous death toll and casualties for both sides. The exact numbers vary in the different sources, also taking into account that many servicemen and civilians went missing (Ohanian, 2005), but for certain, as a result of the war there were more than 30,000 confirmed deaths of servicemen and civilians and approximately 1 million displaced Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The 1st Karabakh War came to an end with a ceasefire agreement, known also as the Bishkek protocol, mediated by the Russian Federation. Nagorno-Karabakh, with the support of Armenia, came out of the war a *victor.* Although I should stress that on my part the categories of victory and defeat are being used with uttermost reservations, as they naturally fail to capture the devastation continuously instigated by the prolonged conflict. Still, looking at the crude facts, Nagorno-Karabakh arrived at a win – not only it solidified its position as a de facto independent state, but the Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh volunteer units gained control over additional Azerbaijani territories that created a buffer zone surrounding the territory of Artsakh, and the Lachin Corridor, which connects Artsakh with Armenia. With the ceasefire, the conflict entered into a frozen phase,

sustained by slow peace negotiations and occasional minor clashes and ceasefire violations (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, n.d.).

After the war, the change of power and the calcification of a new political status quo in both Armenia and Azerbaijan lead to slow, but steadily increasing combative rhetoric, which eventually *unfroze* the conflict. Early on the 2nd of April 2016, a major military escalation broke out at the line of contact, later it was confirmed that Azerbaijan was the one who launched the offensive. Both sides resorted to using heavy weapons, suffered significant losses of military equipment and according to the available data about 200 people, servicemen and civilians, were killed during the clashes (Jarosiewicz & Falkowski, 2016). The battles continued until the 5th of April, hence this escalation is remembered as the April or the 4-day war. The escalation was abruptly halted with a new ceasefire agreement, the arrangement was reached during a formal discussion, but nothing was put on paper officially. Nevertheless, this ceasefire was also intended as a prompt for renewal of substantial peace negotiations, especially in the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. The 4-day war was an indicator of how the military balance between the two sides has shifted in the years following the first war. For Azerbaijan, this episode was considered as a symbolic win; while for the conflict en masse – it illuminated the fragility of the *frozen* status. This escalation implied that the new status quo will be one of an unceasing expectation for the next escalation to erupt.

Following this episode, the political scenery in Armenia entered a period of serious transition. Public trust in the Russia-tied leadership has been constantly declining, corruption was sweeping the country, and abuse of political and economic power was perceived as a banality. This situation, however, turned out to be a source of great civic mobilisation, and in the spring of 2018 Armenia arrived at its own Velvet Revolution (Vartanyan, 2018). Nikol Pashinyan, a journalist and established oppositionist, emerged as the new leader, who was capable of harnessing people's accumulated frustrations with promises for a "different Armenia" and turned them into new hopes for the future. The large-scale demonstrations, with thousands of people pouring to the streets of Yerevan, including many travelling from the regions to join the movement, lead to Pashinyan eventually being elected as Prime Minister.

Figure 1. *Map of the conflict, 1990 – April 2023.* (Source: Le Monde diplomatique 2023, Copyright © Le Monde diplomatique, Cécile Marin, April 2023)

In the meantime, Nagorno-Karabakh in close ties with Armenia kept navigating its independence. In 2017 Nagorno-Karabakh held a constitutional referendum and with a majority of voters in favour the de facto state was renamed to the Republic of Artsakh and more power was vested to the President, in order to take quicker decisions under security threats. In Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev's authoritarian regime was thriving and all attempts for authentic oppositional currents were systemically extinguished or exiled. By the time of Pashinyan's election and afterwards, despite his emotive statement from a 2019 visit to Stepanakert "Artsakh is Armenia", Armenia had not officially recognized Artsakh's independence. In fact, to date Artsakh is recognized only by Abkhazia, Ossetia, and Transnistria – all non-UN members and themselves breakaway states with limited recognition. In the face of all the changes and internal

developments, one thing remained constant – minor clashes continued to take place, and it was clear that the ceasefire was growing more and more fragile.

Already in July 2020, the frequency and severity of escalations along the line of contact were increasing, with no notable de-escalation route in sight. The morning of 27th of September was the juncture – what began as a localised clash at the Lachin Corridor, quickly turned into a full-scale offensive from Azerbaijani side. That day the new war began. Azeri armed forces were disproportionately more powerful than the Artsakh Defence Army. Azerbaijan had at its disposal military drones imported from Israel and Turkey and there were reports of the deployment of Syrian mercenaries (*The Deployment of Mercenaries in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict (Motion for a Resolution)*, 2021; Center for Truth and Justice, 2022). Even with the support of Armenian volunteers, Artsakh Defence Army could not prevent Azerbaijan from taking the upper hand. The Second Karabakh war lasted 44 days. This war as well ended with a ceasefire, again mediated by Russia. On 9th of November, the three state leaders Pashinyan, Aliyev and Putin signed a trilateral ceasefire agreement. As per the 9th of November agreement, Artsakh had to cede control over the buffer territories, occupied during the First Karabakh War. During the war, Azerbaijan had captured the symbolic city of Shushi and other territories of Artsakh, which were to remain under Azeri control. Azerbaijan, with immense military support from Turkey, came out of the war a victor and President Aliyev made sure to communicate that this was not just a provisional victory, despite all the losses Azeri side suffered, and that the Karabakh issue is solved.

(2) SELF-DETERMINATION: THE PROBLEM AND THE SOLUTION?

> How to put it… ամեն մեկն իր խաչն է կրում [amen mekn ir khachn e krum] – do you say this in Bulgarian? In Russian, it's – каждый несёт свой крест [kazhdyj nesët svoj krest]… everyone must carry their cross. That's our cross… Karabakh and its people, and their rights to live unthreatened and to have the freedom to decide for themselves. (Tigran*, 09.08.2022)

> I want to emphasise this, I use every opportunity I have to make this one thing clear – to people in Armenia and to anyone who's interested from the outside – what we urgently need is a meaningful solution. The ceasefire is not the end of the war. As it is right now the issue remains unresolved. I believe that any conclusion is better than this uncertainty. But of course we have to fight for a meaningful solution […] In the 90s, Armenian officials chose the path of self-determination. They chose not to go with annexation but to leave it to the people of Karabakh. And this leads us to today. In many ways self-determination is both the unresolved problem and our best chance towards a meaningful solution. (Gor*, 10.08.2022)

The fundamental steppingstone necessary to get into the nitty-gritty of what insights claimants and bearers of the right to self-determination bring into the discourse, and to further analyse to what extent those insights and perspectives can augment the productivity of implementing self-determination, is having a closer look at self-determination theory and the different connotations vested into the notion. Understanding those connotations separately but also in tight relation to each other, as well the disciplinary background they are conceived in, helps to navigate the ambiguity of the concept of self-determination. Here, I circle back once again to the ambiguous character of the concept, which was already established in the introduction because en route to familiarising myself with the state of the art and rehashing the vast amount of literature against the background of my empirical findings, it stood out that the ambiguity is a matter that must be thoughtfully integrated into the conversation. Rather than thinking of it as an aspect that requires solution or legal fixing, in order for self-determination to perform more inclusively, the productive capacity of ambiguity can be used as one of the gateways of the analysis.

As I first started going into the theoretical debates, one thing immediately drew my attention – there is barely any writing on self-determination that I came across, which didn't open up with a detailed elaboration on how intricate the discussion matter on hand is. Authors kept coming up with descriptors on the challenge-ridden nature of the concept – "indeterminate and incoherent" (Tesón, 2016), "thorny topic" (Xanthaki, 2004), "extremely problematic and

unsatisfying" (Shaw, 2004), "insufficient" (Castellino, 2004) or a "conceptual morass" (Kingsbury, 2002). On par with those, however, there are also statements, sometimes perplexingly brought out just a couple of lines apart in the same source, that acknowledge self-determination's "extreme necessity" (Rodríguez-Santiago, 2016) and praise it for its productive and creative capacities (Shaw, 2004). All those, albeit simply introductory remarks, set the stage for a larger intertextual discussion to interpret the world-making consequences of ambiguity and internal conceptual contradictions in the field of international law and human rights. On that basis, I develop my own understanding of what role ambiguity plays for interpreting self-determination and implementing it in practice. Ambiguity is an inherited feature of the concept, it has been passed down by the relevant decision-makers in the different historical '*eras'* of sustaining self-determination within the international legal order. Additionally, ambiguity has been restated into the notion by legal scholars, and political philosophers. When putting self-determination under the spotlight of intellectual scrutiny, and even more so if we attempt to figure out its capacity and its highs and lows from an anthropological perspective, I choose to employ ambiguity and inherent contradictions as an analytical lens. This choice was later reinforced by some of the interactions I had with my interlocutors, who much like the experts in the field are preoccupied to the greatest extent with the ambiguities of carrying out self-determination in practice, and the problems and further complications that may result from attempting to do that. As the two quotes above show, for Tigran* and Gor*, who in our conversations both straddled the line between expertise and their personal non-expert experiences, self-determination is burdensome, yet freeing; it is at the roots of the problem, while at the same time it is recognized as the most desirable solution.

In this sense, the present chapter makes an effort to examine a research-tailored adaptation of the age-old riddle – which came first: self-determination as a problem or self-determination as a solution? — starting from a bird's-eye view outline of how the concept of self-determination evolved under changing historical and political conditions. Subsequently, through the lens of ambiguity, I will discuss the different directions in which self-determination theory branches out and how the array of connotations, i.e. categorizations of self-determination becomes a top-down instrument to make self-determination more feasible, although not necessarily more obtainable. This two-tier theoretical compendium serves as a springboard to critically question the prevailing theoretical takes, studying them side by side to alternative

approaches to understand self-determination as an international practice. On this note, I can engage with some points of critique from an anthropological perspective, which are embedded in the findings of the empirical research.

2.1 Self-determination theory

Three disclaimers are worth noting in advance to help calibrate readers' expectations and understandings, regardless of their disciplinary background or how well-versed they are in the organisation of international (human rights) law. The first feature that comes through in the written discourse is that all attempts to trace the transformation of how self-determination is interpreted or to analyse the occurrence of contemporary challenges before its application are remarkably historicized. The historical scope encompasses not only an outline of how self-determination emerged as a legal principle, but also includes observations of the pre-formalization history of the notion. Second, is the emphasis on language and its use as a cause of paradoxes that equally confuse the consensus on the definitions of internal to the theory notions, and tumbles the conversation on envisioning possible paths to contextual implementation of self-determination. The third notable aspect is that the majority of the contributions come from legal or political philosophers, with very few exceptions. Although I find this latter detail particularly interesting, as to a large extent it is responsible for the framing of the theoretical discussion, and respectively – for the limitations the notion is currently facing, this is something to be discussed in more specificity further on. For now, in order to grasp how the whole idea of self-determination became a dominating factor in international legal and political procedures, yet it remains a driver for discord, let's investigate the first two points more closely.

Chronicles of a theory

As previously mentioned, the notion of self-determination bears a double meaning when discussed in legal terms. The relevant international documents invoke it as a principle of international law and as a human right. The concrete point in time, widely recognized as the

provisional conceptual dawn of self-determination as a principle of law, is to be found in the Charter of the United Nations:

> To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace. (United Nations, 1945: 3, Article I.2)

> With a view to the creation of conditions of stability and well-being which are necessary for peaceful and friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, the United Nations shall promote:
>
> a. higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development;
>
> b. solutions of international economic, social, health, and related problems; and international cultural and educational cooperation; and
>
> c. universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion. (ibid.: 11-12, Article 55)

The UN Charter is an important milestone, as a result of phrasing self-determination on a document of such high authority the concept materialised in international negotiations, bearing certain capacities, meanings, and functions to steer cooperation between nations. Yet by calling it a provisional beginning, I want to indicate that already in the beginning of the 20th century and especially during the interwar period there were influential discussions on how it would be strategically favourable to introduce self-determination formally as a means to security and peace.

The chronicles draw attention to the Leninist-Wilsonian axis with their respective proposals of how to make use of the concept in practice, the debate[4] serves as a critical precursor of the judicial biography of the concept. For me, it did not come as a big surprise that the

[4] In his informative book "The Right of Self-Determination of Peoples: The Domestication of an Illusion" historian Jörg Fisch (2015) attempts to give a full, albeit western-centred, historical account of self-determination tracing back the roots of the concept to the 18th century. For the scope of this thesis, however, I will focus on the debates from the inter-war period, as I find them to be particularly influential with regard to framing the conceptual ambiguity that developed later on.

contemporary scholars, who pay attention to this moment of history, (e.g. Macklem, 2016; Mégret, 2016; Patten, 2016) either fully omit Lenin's thoughts on self-determination or regard them as being without much political merit unless in opposition to Wilson's ideas. Lenin has written extensively on the right of self-determination as an intersection of questions of national culture, identity, and language, and national equality, containing profound criticism towards national conservatism (Lenin, 1914/1972). Even though his writings engaged thoroughly with issues that later become actual contradictions for the implementation of the concept, for example how to ensure that people have access to this right and ability to exercise it without collectively succumbing to "bourgeois strivings for national exclusiveness" (Lenin, 1914/1972: 454), from a present-day reading his proposals remain in the shadows. I am left with an impression that this is a deliberate choice, rather than a sign of knowledge deficiency. The authors, referred to above, give much more relevance to the allusions to self-determination made by US President Woodrow Wilson with his remark that "every people has a right to choose the sovereignty under which they shall live" (Wilson, 1916), although this is a rather half-mouthed and cautious speaking of the elephant in the room. This precaution stems from the desire to gain a strategical upper hand in the international order, which was of key importance to Wilson's administration at the time. As one examination of Wilson's succeeding public statements (guided by his advisors) shows, the value of self-determination becomes significantly toned down. In fear of awakening too many small entities to seek independence, the Wilsonian conception of self-determination transformed from an allusion to a political programme into a creed – an attitude towards how to accommodate nationalist aspirations within the US-American post-war course of action (Lynch, 2002: 427). Only after the Wilsonian proposal was clearly positioned – cemented as understanding self-determination as a right to be internally exercised within and under the patronage of a dominant nation state – was it considered timely to integrate a digested interpretation of Lenin's ideas, and thus end up having a polar binary. Unfortunately, in order to make this binary more ideologically compelling, the depth of many of Lenin's arguments – e.g. reflections on self-determination as a path to liberation and as a reciprocal factor in the struggle for democracy or what are the dynamics between self-determination and political secession (Lenin, 1916/1974: 144-145) – has been stripped down. As a result of this, instead of informing the theoretical debate, the legacy of the Leninist-Wilsonian axis eventually turns out to outset much of the later theoretical and practical conundrums. As a principle, (national)

self-determination creates the paradox of synchronously supporting and challenging statehood, and clashes with the principle of territorial integrity (Koskenniemi, 1994: 248). This paradox materialises with tangible consequences when the right to self-determination of one party is recognized, by which the status-quo territorial integrity of another party is revoked.

As these paradoxes turn into precedents, and alongside the concerns, if it will ever be possible to find a consensus for a precise and applicable definition of self-determination, some scholars embarked on a quest to pin down this precision through examination of the moral reasoning of the theory. The moral discourse is too substantial to comprehensively sum up here, yet why I find it interesting is that those discussions are not solely rooted in the moral principles of law, but that they operate under the idea of a shared international morality. Specifically, one more recent argument drew my attention, as it intertwines (international) morality with actorship and political capacity. Van Der Vossen (2016) examines the moral variations existing as a result of self-determination, and in his essay he questions what are the roots of the moral variation of national/collective self-determination between different political societies. He puts under scrutiny the preconception that nation states are the central moral actors, and that in a sense self-determination is a moral status alongside independence and democracy tenable only by the said moral actors. In his view the problem of moral variation revolves around the fact that the preoccupation with the question of what is required to respect self-determination claims (in other words what makes those claims legitimate) counterbalances inquiries into what *is* self-determination per se (Van Der Vossen, 2016: 15). From the packed, and earnestly, quite complex domain of thoughts on the moral aspects of self-determination, I find this particular idea significant for my study as it suggests that the uncertain character of the *is*, conjointly with the interest towards it as a central concern, are a subject of change. Despite the challenges and the plethora of still unresolved sociopolitical outcomes, at least in terms of what is self-determination, during the decolonization process a certain general agreement was reached. But the subsequent attempts to apply the same decolonization logic to the cases after the fall of the iron curtain lead the grasp of self-determination astray (Fisch, 2015), while the rearrangement of the global order allowed for the discourse of *eligibility* for self-determination to flourish.

As we have traced in the history of self-determination theory, the notion – just like a pendulum – is alternating between ambiguity and attempts, most notably legal ones, to establish

a baseline of certainty. Even when circumscribed in the formulation of a human right, paradoxes continue to overcloud the grasp of what the notion actually is, and in result the entire field of "international law of self-determination both exists and is obscure" (Crawford, 2001: 10). The literature I engaged with indicates that one of the shortcuts to corroborating the reality of self-determination is looking into its history. Undoubtedly, I can't argue that the historicization of the concept is irrelevant. On the contrary, as I have also showcased so far, understanding the historical conditions that made it possible for the idea of self-determination to be formally grounded in our collective consciousness and international legal practice, are critical to understand the basic margins for action and limitations within which the concept can be currently exercised. Nonetheless, I find that the perpetual reliance on the historical legacies of self-determination stifles the productivity of the concept by blurring the lines between case studies, contexts, and regions. The attempt to organise this history in a coherent, consistent, and upward-advancing timeline of development prevails over the need to think of tailored solutions that take into account specific social, cultural, and political realities and regional, themselves historically-bounded, tensions. None of the authors I lead indirect dialogues with, shies away from the inherent ambiguity, which makes me think that the preoccupation with history is an effort to make order out of ambiguity. Yet, the constant temporal anchoring of the theoretical discussions, e.g. the tendency to follow the eras of self-determination as progressive development, simultaneously leads to an overall de-territorialization of the cases in which self-determination came into being. What I imply is that a specific case of self-determination will be more readily discussed with emphasis when on the timeline of self-determination history it took place, rather than where. The listing of examples – from the decolonization period to more recent cases such as Kosovo and East Timor – becomes simply a record of self-determination's failures and successes to carry on the chronicles of the theory, but it doesn't necessarily straighten out, what remains ambivalent for the contemporary processes of implementation of self-determination.

Speaking of self-determination

Parallel to framing the theory of self-determination through how the history of the concept reproduces our very understandings of it and vice versa, the other component playing an

important role directing the grasp of the concept is how self-determination is spoken of. In terms of the semantic ambiguities of self-determination itself, not the wider web of conceptual variations it has generated, we can separate them into two planes: contextual use and framing of the "self".

On the one hand, the spectrum of usage ranges from a colloquial and everyday use to the terminological one. This certainly does not come as a surprise, as nowadays the colloquial appropriation of scholarly terms is a common practice. I view the process of assimilating academic language into frequent, ordinary circulation as an overall positive development that bears a great potential to democratise social sciences. At the same time, I understand that often in such cases the theoretical meaning gets obscured or that there is even the possibility of the colloquial expressions to adopt an entirely different connotation than the original one. Thereupon, I can fathom why some scholars might be wary of how self-determination has been proliferated in recent years as a cumulative notion describing all types of individual or collective pursuits of identity and belonging. At the same time, as Castellino (2004) rightfully notes the expert discourse on self-determination has become fundamentally oversaturated with numerous political, legal, and academic references and interpretations, varying from emotive slogans to operationalized renditions. As a result of which the language and conversation surrounding the concept fails to get a clear message, instead it is much more likely to come across "as international doublespeak with uncertain meaning" (Castellino, 2004: 55), even for the people whose work aims to straighten out the discourse. From this point of view and pertaining to the anthropological attentiveness towards the multilayered dynamics between individuals and collectives, I maintain the position that since the self-determination discourse is already rhetorically overwhelmed, research and practice can only benefit from engaging with popular readings of the notion. Equivalently to how my fieldwork experience has taught me to avoid breaking down the concept's history into phases and stages when examining it in practice, I got down the path to go beyond dichotomizing the lexical use of self-determination. Instead, hereby I attempt to gradually unearth how the range of usage continuously reciprocates meaning, and how those different modes of speaking of self-determination inform each other. Does this augment a more comprehensive discourse, or on the contrary, further stifles the ability of different parties to understand each other?

On the other hand, the theory is invested in an unfolding discussion about the choice of words to identify and frame the self in self-determination – oscillating between an individual and collective. Fisch (2015) proposes to approach this question on a meta level. His examination of the history of the legal concept originates in the field of the individual, with the general inquiry being: are "humans self-determined beings, or do they merely have the potential to become self-determined, which is not necessarily always realised in practice?" (Fisch, 2015: 26). In response to this he upholds the viewpoint that while individuals are considered to be inherently capable of self-determination, this capacity is not as easily achievable when we translate the concept into a collective human right, with the main challenge being the fact that a collective claim must be anchored in an assemblage of individual actions (ibid.). While Fisch is generally a proponent of self-determination, this observation opportunely sheds light on the enormous conceptual difficulty ensuing from the necessity to conceptualise a group self to self-determine.

After the United Nations human rights covenants proclaimed that "all peoples have the right of self-determination" (United Nations (General Assembly), 1966a, Articles 1.1 & 1.3; United Nations (General Assembly), 1966b, Articles 1.1 & 1.3), the scholarship had no other alternative than to begin imagining and conceptualising self-determination beyond the individual self. It quickly appeared, however, that this is a much more significant stumbling block seeing that for legal scholars, most of all, *peoples* as the primary bearer of the right of self-determination is a bewildering category. The question that bothers legal logic is – what is *peoples*? Because the wording in the covenants implies that not any given population comprises *peoples* that have this right. And furthermore, is any group of people *peoples* in the sense of being bearers or claimants of collective human rights? To a certain degree, these attitudes later translated into the legal formulations of self-determination. Articles I.2 and 55 of the UN Charter lay the ground for the concept to, jointly with the principle of equal rights, emerge as the common "legal standard of behaviour" (Cassese, 1995: 46) for the post-war path to recovery and reconciliation, and as a result of those to a mutually ensured universal peace and well-being. Yet it transpired that a principle of law is in its core insufficient because of its recommendatory character. In the case of self-determination of people as a principle, the ambiguity stems from how the concept is conceived as an instrument for state relations (Macklem, 2016: 106) versus how it can actually be operationalized. The UN Charter sketches out self-determination of peoples as a goal to be achieved, but the document does not specify either the parameters of the

goal, or the parameters of the roadmap to its accomplishment. These circumstances lead the way to formally advance the notion, reshaping it from a principle to a concrete right. The notion is not rendered verbatim in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), however the articles related to the freedoms of thought, conscience, and religion (United Nations, 1948, Article 18), and the economic, social and cultural rights as fundamental for dignified and free development of one's personality (ibid., Article 22) offer an insight into the direction of how to convert the principle of law into a human right. The UDHR is the bedrock on which the subsequent covenants[5] seal the legal framework of the right to self-determination:

> All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. […]
>
> The States Parties to the present Covenant, including those having responsibility for the administration of Non-Self-Governing and Trust Territories, shall promote the realization of the right of self-determination, and shall respect that right, in conformity with the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations. (United Nations (General Assembly), 1966a, Articles 1.1 & 1.3; United Nations (General Assembly), 1966b, Articles 1.1 & 1.3)

Alongside its formal introduction to the domain of human rights, self-determination retained prominence with regard to the decolonization process. The Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (United Nations, 1960) employs self-determination in the same manner as it later becomes cemented in the covenants, and scholars unanimously recognize how successfully self-determination has contributed to the process towards independence of former colonies. It draws attention, however, that even amidst this momentum the deep-seated ambiguity of the concept keeps coming to the fore. Apparently, the shift from a principle to a right did not help gain more clarity but opened the door for more *groups*.

In many ways this definitional conundrum is embroidered throughout all the historical conceptual meandering, which we have already covered, as well as it has its unavoidable mark

[5] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) from 1966.

on how self-determination actualizes in practice. Admittedly, there have been instances in which international legal practice reached a consensus to pin down what the category of *peoples* designates. One way is to interact with the category historically, namely to regard *peoples* as a designation for indigenous populations from the territories formerly colonised by the Western European powers (Tesón, 2016: 2). Hence, it is feasible why the application of the collective right of self-determination is considered to be particularly successful under decolonization law. Holding in mind the critique that can be put forward with regard to the negative impacts of the decolonization process as it took place, from the perpetuation of global inequalities and dependencies to the deepening of local political instabilities, but insulating it for a second in the interest of the argument. When we examine the right of self-determination within decolonization projects, it is clear how this account of defining *peoples* gained recognition. Once an interpretation was provided through colonial relations and aspirations for independence, the unclear and to an extent abstract entity of *peoples* became a concrete and conceivable stakeholder. The second perspective aiming to delineate the composition of *peoples* is the nationalist view of self-determination, which connotes that *peoples* comes into being through their ethnic status. Tesón further reveals that, while ethnicity is treated as the principal adhesive that makes a group of people *peoples*, there are different distinctive factors or incarnations of ethnicity, most common examples being religion and language, that shape the internal and external sociopolitical motion of self-determination in the different contexts (Tesón, 2016: 4).

The nationalist account is favoured particularly in diplomatic and legal practices, for the reason that, similarly to the historical explanation, it provides feasibility. In an international legal order that operates under the presumption that nation states are the main actors, equating *peoples* to nations through ethnicity employs the already available thought-frames to make sense of a legally abstract entity. Simultaneously, nonetheless, the nationalist conception is also the apple of discord, many thinkers dread the possibility of it leading to an unhinged nationalism. This disunity of opinions stratifies the theory on one more level. Some scholars defend the nationalist account under the claim that national identity is one of the most tenacious unifying factors, and therefore nations as entities of *peoples* are in result united into “proper holders” (Tesón, 2016: 4) of the right of self-determination. Miller (1995) is one of the strong proponents of the nationalist conception, who views national communities as a source of shared identity and shared loyalty (Miller, 1995: 93), these strong ties serve as a solid foundation for clearly envisioning, claiming

and exercising self-determination, and thus holding the right to it. Such 'endorsing' accounts of the nationalist conception, provoke us to think of nationalism and nationality and how they evoke feelings of belonging outside the contemporary mainstream conservative and far-right discourse that uses nationalist and patriotic urges either to appeal to followers or to antagonise opponents. As Miller concludes, again shifting from a collective to an individual perspective, people holding liberal views increasingly struggle to make sense of nationalist demands, and attempting to understand one's own sense of national belonging (Miller, 1995: 183) may better the way we navigate extreme nationalist streams both *intra*-nationally and internationally. Admittedly, the tensions surrounding nationalist movements have worsened immensely in the past 25 years since Miller's work was first published, but even bethinking the overall consensus to be more cautious with intellectual "defence" of nationalism, Miller's proposal hits the mark when we transfer it back to the level of the right of self-determination. How can a collective *We* understand somebody else's strive for (national) self-determination, if we are incognizant or refuse to grapple with the roots of our own national *determination* and the resulting privileges we automatically reap out of it?

The median stratum is occupied by scholars, who propose a moderate nationalist grasp. A prominent example emerging from this turf is Raz and Margalit's notion of *encompassing groups* which influenced the formation of different attitudes towards self-determination, forming two camps – of those who tolerate a *timid* self-determination, and a *radical* one – those who advocate for ensuring fair chances for external self-determination. As per the authors, *encompassing groups* display two distinctive characteristics. First, they are agents of pervasive cultures, and second, for members of those encompassing groups the membership i.e. the belonging to the group is essential for the individual self-identity (Margalit & Raz, 1990: 448). And pervasive culture stands for a full-fledged culture, with distinct cultural characteristics omnipresent in all aspects of life and social practices—from language and distinctive cuisine to unique literary, musical or architectural traditions (ibid.: 443). In this rendition, only encompassing groups are recognized as *peoples*, capable of self-governance, and thus having the right to self-determination. On the basis of their culture and deep-seated belonging, encompassing groups are perceived as already consolidated, already self-determined in their mind. In a result, this moderate national perspective sees the right of self-determination as a right over a territory

(ibid.: 458), an attempt to materialise a collective self that is in all other aspects collectively determined.

Following the logic of explaining what constitutes peoples as a collective self, through evaluation of how self-determination and nationality are interdependent, my expectation was that there will be a clearly articulated opposition towards the nationalist conception of self-determination. Surprisingly, although this position is ubiquitously acknowledged in the literature, I did not come across authors who solidly renounce the nationalist interpretation, and provide an alternative approach to resolving the definitional challenges. Probably, the closest attempt to move beyond entangling self-determination with nationalism is best illustrated in the production of different categories to explain and practically operationalize self-determination as a variety of approaches. The categorization strikes as another effort to break down the convoluted concept into less difficult to digest components, it is also a convenient approach to tackle the nationalist aspect. As Morris remarks, "the ambiguity of the predicate *"national" needs* to be resolved" (Morris, 2016: 32, emphasis mine) in order to tackle one of the biggest questions — how to decide what is peoples? And indeed, some categories can help straighten out uncertainties related to nationhood and statehood, however just as with the previous forms of conceptual stratification developing those categories helps sustain the ambiguity surrounding the concept.

2.2 Categorising self-determination

The reasoning that pushes forward my interpretation of ambiguity as a prospect for analysis, rather than as a matter of contention that must be resolved, is twofold. On the one hand, all anthropological inquiry in the human rights discourse is interested in the ambivalent nature of this seemingly universal idea. On the other hand, in particular with the concept at hand, the attempts to lessen or solve the inherent ambiguity of self-determination leads to its overall increase, and illuminates the manifold instances in which the notion is incompatible with real life struggles and expectations. In the foregoing overview of the theory, we came across two focal questions that shape the space for the theoretical debate—(1) which mode of self-determination is put into effect? And (2) what and who is *peoples*? As it transpires both these questions, just like a domino effect, set off a chain of further questions, speculations, and suggestions. The

entangled ambiguity of the notion transpires into some kind of order, in the attempt to sort it out by type. This goes hand in hand with Tesón's (2016) suggestion to operationalize the right to self-determination as much as possible, i.e. to categorise in what specific context, which peoples, to what extent have a right to self-determination.

Because of the conflict between the principle of self-determination and the principle of territorial integrity, claims of self-determination are often equated to pursuits to exercise unilateral secession (Xanthaki, 2004: 14). In this relation, one school of thought proposes to differentiate between internal and external self-determination (Cassese, 1995), where the aspiration for territorial secession is of value for making the contrast. In his examination of the notion, Macklem proposes to endorse self-determination as an instrument to promote a more just distribution of sovereignty (Macklem, 2016: 95), in which the degree to which the acquisition of sovereignty affects the sovereign power distribution in the international legal order, coupled together with potential territorial claims, help us sort out if people are pursuing internal or external self-determination. In these categories, self-determination based sovereignty is something to be bestowed, which turns claimants of self-determination into a class of beneficiaries. Macklem points out that this approach can easily create a stalemate, since, especially in conflict situations, self-determination is inseparable from mitigating injustice (Macklem, 2016: 118). In cases of internal self-determination, it is an instrument to monitor injustice and mobilise resistance, when injustice becomes severe. While in cases of external self-determination, when territorial autonomy is on demand, just as with sovereignty self-determination becomes an instrument to distribute (restore) justice in response to injustice that threatens the very existence of the peoples.

Similar to the dynamic presented in the internal-external dichotomy, there are some scholars, who are inclined to differentiate between minimalist and maximalist understandings of the right of self-determination. The minimalist approach makes sure to give claimants a precise scope of the access to and use of the right, within a given state practice (Xanthaki, 2004: 20). In the minimalist interpretation, self-determination is not recognized as a legal right, but more as a positive moral one within the said state practice (Hannum, 2011), and it is ensured through other judicially acknowledged rights, such as freedom of expression, right to public participation, right to freedom of religion etc. In due course, the maximalist approach is understood as secessionist and is realised through the procurement of full-fledged sovereign autonomy over a territory.

Evidently, the question of territoriality, or what material claims a collective self-determination project brings forward, is hard to circumvent. So another categorial pair suggests we use territorial claims as a main factor of sorting the definition. In his twofold interpretation, Waldron (2010) proposes to differentiate between territorial and identity-based, to which he also refers to as orthodox, self-determination. Surprisingly, his reasoning subverts the expectations created by the discussions so far. Contrary to the previously presented binaries, Waldron's perception of territorial claims is rather pragmatic. He understands territorial self-determination as a manifestation of the principle of self-determination, adjacent to self-government (Waldron, 2010: 407). He acknowledges that our global map already has rigid political boundaries set in place, but in the same time he points out that under the principle of self-determination 'the people of the territory' must have the capacity to intervene in any legislative, political, and administrative arrangements, which affect the territory and them as inhabitants (ibid.). In his comprehension, identity-based self-determination can induce more radical results:

> Demands for identity-based self-determination are often radical demands, seeking to reorder the political world. Because many existing societies comprise several peoples who regard themselves as distinct in this way, identity-based conceptions challenge established boundaries and existing political entities. (Waldron, 2010: 398)

However, he clearly does not bound identity-based self-determination with identity politics, emphasising that *peoples* are not individuals but collectives. An important aspect of Waldorn's identity-based conception is that he puts national self-determination in a more complex context. By building upon other works (e.g. Kymlicka, 2010; Raz, 1986; Raz, 1994) that comprehensively dissect collective self-awareness not as a simplified function of national or ethnic identity, but as complex and multilayered, often intergenerational, experience, Waldron manages to show that self-determination based on a shared collective identity is exercised first and foremost by political communities, and that in this political sense it can include demands for territorial secession, but that in its core its political significance is much broader.

Despite the convincing arguments in favour of expanding the scope of collective identity, the fear of nationalism plays a critical role in the process of deconstructing the notion into

categories. Thus, the previously mentioned nationalist conception prompts further sub-categorization, in order to portray nuances of intersections between the right to self-determination and nationhood. Insofar self-determination is associated with national minorities, the following triad derives from the nationalist conception. In this fashion, the nationalist category is the most *crude* one – it appears to empower national minorities to push internal boundaries, to turn the unjust negative conditions of the minority into positive ones and to balance the boundary conditions of the majority and minority accordingly (Patten, 2016: 124). Patten understands moderate *nationalist* self-determination as an emancipatory pursuit, which does not have to lead to territorial emancipation. He correlates the sub-category of statist self-determination with territorial and crucially with institutional claims. In this case, emancipation is understood as obtaining state autonomy, self-determination of the people happens through the determination of the state and the (national) identity of the collective transpires through establishment of statehood (Patten, 2016: 122). Certainly, the nationalist and statist views share similarities with some of the previously listed categories. In view of the challenges to satisfy self-determination and territorial integrity, Patten suggests differentiating a third type – democratic self-determination. The democratic view is value-based, seeking to install or strengthen the foundation for democracy, inclusion, and equal membership (ibid.: 123) and proponents of the democratic type view it as an ultimate path to fundamental justice.

These categories are, however, very dependent on the question – which people? — and here not in the sense of the previously discussed legal conundrum: what is peoples all together. This inquiry is especially strong in the field of minority studies and extremely relevant if we make sense of self-determination through its productiveness for the decolonization process. In his categorization Patten couples self-determination and the claims for a certain degree of self-government and autonomy with national minorities, but he rightfully asks if the concept of national minority is a coherent one (Patten, 2016: 123), because otherwise we have to acknowledge that this is yet another source of ambiguity. With indigenous and minority rights in mind, Alfredsson (2004) provides an extensive critique on the capacity of international law to coherently differentiate between groups and peoples as beneficiaries of human rights. He maintains that one of the biggest issues for implementing human rights is that the paradigm distinguishes between group rights and peoples rights, but in practice the lines between groups and peoples are blurred (Alfredsson, 2004: 163). There is a consensus on defining minorities,

indigenous and tribal groups, but Alfredsson argues that these groups are not necessarily all after self-determination as means to achieving self-government and sovereignty (ibid.). In a sense, this argument is an invitation to discern between group right and peoples right to self-determination, with the latter potentially having a more comprehensive scope and more cardinal aims to affect the international order. This of course does not mean that following this logic groups cannot become peoples, but implies that often the legal, social and political recognition sought by minorities and indigenous peoples is not achievable primary through self-determination.

Parallel to the classification based upon the scope or the agency of the claim, there are a handful of scholars who propose arbitrary categories. Buchanan (1997) speaks of applying the idea of primary and remedial rights to self-determination, which is later further expanded into an unequivocal suggestion to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate secession (Lister, 2016). This approach shifts the attention from who and how wants to carry out their right to self-determination to identifying justifiable reasons and situations, in which such actions are acceptable. Moreover, these judgement passing categories zoom out from peoples as the bearer of self-determination, and spotlight the variety of other actors which get to decide when a self-determination project is legitimate. External powers become the decision-makers, they are the ones in power to provide support to such an endeavour, or to obstruct it. And this is something that the history and the theory of the notion oftentimes don't fully acknowledge—although it is meant to be emancipatory, the practical implementation of self-determination reproduces the existing political hierarchies and power dynamics. Self-determination is not an independent, one-sided act, nor is it a bipartisan conflict of secession and territorial integrity. By the logic and the mechanisms of the international legal order, self-determination involves and requires the decision-making of the international community.

2.3 Bridging the disciplines – critique and anthropological observations

Delving into the theory of self-determination and having a go at condensing this maze of thoughts and arguments, which were to a large extent foreign for me as well, has pushed me down into a rabbit hole. In many ways my exploration of the concept and its development resembled facing the Lernaean Hydra—the moment I worked through one question, two more immediately came into view, interfering with me moving forward. Already when I began

designing the scope of this research and started narrowing down the research question, I have set myself up to approach self-determination so to speak with a grain of salt. The impetus for this research originated from encountering how the idea of self-determination was used as a beacon of hope amidst the daily reports of death and destruction during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. Insofar my initial sense-making of the concept and its application were welded by contradictions. This was further linked by how anthropology engages with the human rights discourse. In the first place, the discipline questions critically if human rights are universally applicable, as it is intended in the constituting documents, which spills over to the exploration of how the system of human rights perpetuates existing power dynamics and hierarchies. In light of this, throughout the exploration of the theory, while navigating the different streams of discussion and critique, I was attentive for arguments to help me bridge self-determination theory with the hypothesis that guided my research question and the fieldwork, and the anthropological discourse on human rights.

Fundamental for my investigation of self-determination through the lived experiences of people, was the understanding that self-determination is not a one-time act, but a continuous process. I was very encouraged when I came across Frédéric Mégret's (2016) idea of interpreting self-determination not as a right that is inherent, but as a right that needs to be earned. Mégret's essay was such a valuable discovery, as it reflects critically on issues, which in other contributions have been a thorn in the eye for my anthropological sensitivity. For instance, one of the biggest controversies is the question of legitimacy—which peoples and whose claims for self-determination are legitimate and hence deserving of recognition? To this, Mégret answers:

> Self-determination does not just spring from the constituted body of a people but is always a demand for recognition in that one cannot exercise forms of collective self-determination in isolation from the world. It is an aspiration to be a self-determining people among self-determining peoples. (Mégret, 2016: 60)

But he also underlines that when we discuss the aspect of recognition, we do this in light of self-determination in its function as a principle of international law (Mégret, 2016: 46), nonetheless if we operate with the idea of the right in mind then relying solely on external recognition would be purposeless. Instead, Mégret argues that peoples' *worthiness* emerges not

from who/what these peoples is, but from the experiences leading to and the struggle for self-determination (Mégret, 2016: 47). This is a rare glimpse in the legal-political literature on self-determination, which hints towards the universalism-relativism debate. For anthropologists, the clash between culture and rights materialises in the question: is the human rights framework indeed beneficial, effective and applicable universally; or in fact the cultural variety, at best, extinguishes human rights' capacity and, at worst, the attempt to *en*force human rights causes more violence? Of course, this inevitably leads to the formation of opposing schools of thought—those who defend human rights for their unparalleled capacity to protect humanity and those for whom cultural relativism is simply too difficult to overcome with such a bureaucratized Western-centric framework. A highlight from this discussion, which is highly relevant for my investigation of self-determination, is the suggestion to examine the universalism-relativism debate in motion. First, it is important to keep in mind that the human rights discourse is in itself an ongoing global process, for some scholars even commensurable in scope and repercussion to colonialism, capitalism, or the nation-state (Merry, 2001: 34, *see also:* Merry, 1997, Wilson, 1997). In response to this to disunion, Marie-Bénédicte Dembour invites us to expand our understanding of universalism and relativism not as confronting independent positions, but as the posts demarcating the space in which the implementation of human rights oscillates (Dembour, 2001: 56). In many ways this resonates with the ideas brought forward by Mégret — to investigate self-determination as a right to be earned and through the practices of earning it. The preoccupation with what *is* people, suggests that the right to self-determination exists as a given and what is missing, is finding out what/which are the right people to claim it. Additionally, Mégret directs attention to the question of what people *do*. He conjugates self-determination with experiences of injustice, saying that it is not simply the pursuit of nationhood but severe experiences of injustice that motivate and are the ultimate basis for claiming self-determination (Mégret, 2016: 52). On a side note, this "revelation" comes as a little bit of a brain-teaser, it should be common sense that human rights are meant as a response to global, systemic and deep-rooted injustices, hence this must be the key lens through which we interact with them. Surprisingly, though in academic debates the correlation between injustice and self-determination is often obscured by other discussions, so I find this reminder to be extremely timely and pertinent. Mégret's observation opens up a window to look at self-determination not simply through who (ethnic minorities, indigenous people, religious groups) or to what ends

(increased political representation, self-governance, full territorial sovereignty) but through how self-determination is enacted. Shifting the attention to self-determination as a process of political struggle also allows us to register how the dynamic relationship between self-perception and other-perception (Ohlin, 2016: 71) influences the actions and in some cases inactions towards achieving the status *'self-determined'*.

One of the few anthropological contributions distinctly focusing on the right of collective self-determination is a Rodolfo Stavenhagen's article amply titled "Self-determination. Right or demon?" (1996), in which he as well actively promotes the processual understanding of the concept. Stavenhagen argues that human rights are not simply a matter of technical decision in international law, nor they are something to be claimed/exercised only once—like a joker card—after which the right and access to the right are discarded for good (Stavenhagen, 1996: 22). The same logic should be applied to self-determination—it is not a point in time marked by a single event, be it plebiscites, protests, uprisings, or war. Actually, according to Stavenhagen these one-time political happenings are the least exemplary exercises of self-determination in practice (ibid.). He advocates for rethinking self-determination as an ongoing and open-ended process, comprising moral and political practices. Moreover, he suggests considering the process of self-determination as a form of "social being" or "collective existence" in practice (ibid., *see also:* Ronen, 1979) — continuous and conscious group actions aiming at obtaining power over one's life and existence. Stavenhagen indicates the strong reliance of self-determination on democracy, pointing out that democracy is not only necessary from within, i.e. for the peoples claiming self-determination. If a self-determination initiative is to succeed and flourish internally, it requires a truly democratic system (Stavenhagen, 1996: 26) to exist in.

I hinted earlier at the fact that most of the researchers engaged in the theoretical disentanglement of self-determination are legal scholars and political philosophers, which has profound impacts on how the entire discourse is framed. The shift of tone is eye striking in the contributions by researchers with a more interdisciplinary background. On par with Stavenhagen's approach, there are some other thought-provoking ideas, which deviate from the path of the usual conundrums. As an example, Iris Marion Young suggests reimagining self-determination as a principle of non-interference (Young, 2001) or non-domination (Young, 2005) with which she studies the ongoing *search* for relational independence of indigenous peoples within the international community. In turn, Jane Cowan (2001) looks first into the

process of minoritization and its impacts as a precondition for the establishment of emancipatory movements. These scholars don't wave away the central issues and the contradictions from the broader theoretical debate, but they embed these in empirical case studies. Sociologists and anthropologists don't shy away from the question of the self, nor they find the collective entity *of peoples* unfathomable, instead they push forward the questions of agency and subject-object dynamics. This allows to skim some of the piled-up ambiguity and give a concrete form to the abstract theoretical conundrums.

Circling back to Mégret, I want to highlight his awareness that as a process self-determination has multiple dimensions, most prominent political, legal and moral, and eventually techno-bureaucratic in terms of international recognition. In order to move forward to an exploration of the concept embedded in my empirical findings, it is important to call attention also to the mundane dimensions of this process. Everyday practices, engagements, dis-engagements, self-identified non-political actions are just as much a formative part of continuous self-determination. While on the surface they may seem discontinued from clear-cut political acts like referenda, protests, civil disobedience etc, their day-to-day consistency is what makes the idea and aspiration of self-determination endure.

2.4 To carry your cross?

By now, it has surely become clear that discussions on the matter of self-determination are not particularly light-hearted. The concept seems to be equally burdensome for those who study it and for those who seek it. Yet, the load of this burden is juxtaposed asymmetrically. I would argue that the asymmetry derives from how much distance there is between the agents and the self-determination project, as the discrepancy in the burden of sense making and carrying out self-determination is not simply an outcome of opposing top-down and bottom-up perspectives.

Although the academic discussions are multifrontal, they often convey the impression of dealing with intellectual riddles, instead with real-life struggles bearing material implications. Nonetheless, these debates are not just an exercise of theoretical navel-gazing descending in the depths of conceptualising, even in the abstract debates outlined above there is a lot of grounded deliberation. And yet I struggled to connect the dots between the assemblage of ideas in the literature and the insights my interlocutors shared with me, and vice versa. When I started

replaying in my mind the conversations and encounters I had in the field, it did not lead to the anticipated parallels with the literature. Instead of elaborating on the notions and categories with these newly gained perspectives, these experiences triggered fragmented recalling. Aphorisms, random phrases, out of context formulations from the literature started resurfacing. These fragments were activated by accidentally scribbled notes from an interview or observations, something I noted down quickly in the bus on my way back from a meeting. I was unsure if these are alterations of something I have previously found in the literature or early signs of me processing the information. “Might makes right" (Tesón, 2016: 8), “inconsistent with democracy” (Rodríguez-Santiago, 2016: 236), “abandoned states” (Rodríguez-Santiago, 2016: 240), “alternative to war” (Fisch, 2015: 58), “chance of the weak” (Fisch, 2015: 250), “keep denying standing to substate entities (Gilbert, 2004: 161), tension reducing projects (Packer, 2004: 260), priority to justice is utopian (Freeman, 1995: 37), “harmfulness of missrecognition” (Williams, 2014: 4), “arbiter of just and unjust recognition” (Williams, 2014: 8) – these fragments have gradually lost the meaning vested in them in the original context and became free-floating associations, which bridged passages from the theory with insights of my interlocutors. The narrated experiences, which were shared with me, were naturally disorganised, tinted with emotions, disappointments, past expectations, new hopes, pride from successes, shame, grief and persistence, and a significant amount of guardedness. Upon revision, the out-of-context snippets echoed the intertwined concerns of my interlocutors and the way they explain to themselves the situation they are personally and collectively in. “Might makes right” or “chance of the weak" mirror the way the external perception towards Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh vs. Azerbaijan is imagined, while “priority to justice is utopian”, “abandoned states” and “*denying standing* to substate entities” relate to sentiments regarding impunity and hypocrisy in international order. In the same vein, many other random phrases opened cracks in the theoretical facade, which enabled me to draw parallels with the personal interpretations of self-determination as an open-ended process. For my research partners, the idea of self-determination as a right is initiated by the official narratives, but the way they imagine a recognized Artsakh unfolds through what happens to them and what they do, and not through the Human Rights Charter.

The two quotes, with which I opened this chapter, in a similar way cross back and forth between intellectualising the idea of self-determination as a political act, with personal takes and

first-hand experiences. Initially, Tigran*'s biblical metaphor of self-determination as the cross, which Armenians have to take up and carry, came across as somewhat rehearsed. But even if so, this reference illuminates on the one hand, the significance of the Armenian Apostolic Church for the national identity, and on the other, it binds self-determination with responsibility. This aspect contributes substantially to the question of agency in self-determination, as it shows that self-determination is not only up for demand, nor that the people are simply beneficiaries or right-claimants (Tesón, 2016; Macklem, 2016). In his statement, Tigran* indicates that the sought outcomes "the rights to live unthreatened and to have the freedom to decide for themselves" are a product not only of collective involvement but also of sharing responsibility. Likewise, by naming it both the problem and the solution my interlocutor Gor* unintentionally commented on the issue of self-determination as a theoretical conundrum, showing that the capacities and the limitations of the concept can be two sides of the same coin. On a personal level, he shares opinions on how the process of self-determination takes place and is thus held up by the conditions of uncertainty, while in the meantime it also reproduces them.

Both Tigran* and Gor* acknowledged that for Artsakh the question of self-determination is continuous and open-ended and that its weight has been and continues to be passed down the generations, carried and shared collectively. Outside these quotes, our conversations meandered between political-collective and everyday-personal efforts and responsibilities. Leaving one big question open – what impacts are these efforts capable of carrying through when uncertainty is ubiquitous and reliable like quicksand?

Interlude. Why are you here?

"Oh, you don't have any Armenian roots? Wow, I was going to ask you, but we were not there yet… Then, sorry for saying it like that, but why are you here?" (Sose, 15.09.2022) — this was my interlocutor Sose's reaction when I interrupted her advice on how to apply for citizenship and get my Armenian passport, presuming that it will be easy for me because of my Armenian roots. I met with Sose in the second half of the field work, but she was neither the first nor the last person to confront me with this question. In fact, variations of the why-are-you-here accompanied me in every interview along the way.

When I was talking to my interview partners, I made sure to communicate upfront that if they have any questions they can ask back at any point of the interview, but also to keep in mind that we will have some time at the end to discuss anything that might have been left open or unclear for them. In my mind, I was drawing different scenarios how this would go. Depending on who my interlocutor was, I was imagining that they may probe into the scope and conduct of the research or how I came to this topic. And in full awareness of my status as an outsider, I was also expecting to receive personal questions. But I have certainly not accounted that the entire spectrum of inquiries will be overshadowed by one big recurring question – why are you here? This question embodied genuine curiosity, while also encapsulating different attitudes towards my presence in Armenia. Without realising it, soon after I commenced my exploration of personal narratives of self-determination, I found myself in the situation of having to prioritise narrating myself (Ochs & Capps, 1996; Ochs & Capps, 2001).

Frankly, although I was mindful of why it pops up every time, there were instances in which the reappearance of the question perplexed me, like the case with my visit to the small community centre for children from Artsakh, which I visited twice. The first time, I was expecting to interview the founder and see if she would be open to help me facilitate subsequent visits to interview some parents from the community. When one by one women started joining us in the room, I thought they had something planned on the agenda, and it was time for me to wrap up and go. So, I was taken by surprise when the director introduced me to the resident art teacher and announced that these are mothers of the children, who came to speak with me. As I was not prepared for this, I introduced myself and the research, and then I steered the conversation into a round-table-like group interview. Even though they knew each other very well, the group setting

seemed somewhat uncomfortable for some of them, so I encouraged them to ask me questions as well. That afternoon, while we were talking about their experiences, all six women at different points of our conversation asked me why I am here. This was not simply a reiteration of the question to fill the silence or because something was lost in-between languages. They formulated the question similarly, but there were underlying nuances. Why are you here? — once here was *in Armenia*, next here as in their community centre; why are you here and interested in Artsakh, why are you here and talking to us? A couple of weeks later, I went to the centre once more. Again, I spoke extensively with the founder and I had a chance to conduct a one on one interview with one of the women, who was previously reluctant to speak in front of the others. When I stopped recording, we continued chatting more informally. I thanked them for sharing with me and asked them if there is something else they want to know from me. "*I know I asked already, but why are you here, how come you research exactly on people from Artsakh?"*. While it was necessary to *narrate* myself and my presence for the obvious reasons – to introduce myself, to make the purpose of our meeting known, to establish trust – I figured out that this narrative I'm prompted to present over and over again plays an important role in the process of joint sense-making between me and my research partners (Götsch, 2022; Götsch & Palmberger, 2022)

With time passing, I realised that the why-are-you-here turned out to have added value for my demeanour as a field researcher. Navigating the fieldwork on my own was at times quite overwhelming, and if it was not for the constant presence of this question and the expectation to regularly verbalise my answer in front of a different receiving end, I suspect I could have neglected reflecting critically on my positionality in the field. Luckily, I was constantly reminded by my interlocutors to keep an eye on this, and eventually, why-are-you-here became the nexus through which I was reflecting on my positionality throughout the entire process. If I rewind back to the time before I entered the field, in order to explore my positionality upon gaining first access and establishing contact with my interlocutors, I was mostly preoccupied with the question of what justifies my work in Armenia. My concerns were mainly originating from how the interplay between my *westernness* and inexperience affects my identity (Kerstetter, 2012). Although I do not regard myself as a western-European researcher, I am western-European educated and the institution of the University of Vienna colours my credibility differently. On the one hand, I was concerned to not reinforce unconsciously detrimental dynamics of a Western

researcher going abroad. Presumably, these doubts were a transference of my experiences of traversing between German and Austrian academia and Bulgaria, which continues to occupy the ambiguous position of a peripheral EU state, and the irritation I have felt from witnessing how my peers jump into the idea of researching elsewhere. A big chunk of the preparatory reflection on my positionality was hence devoted to sorting out my financial and social privilege as a prerequisite to conduct independent fieldwork in Armenia, while learning how to navigate cultural similarities and differences, some of which were conditioned by my past trajectories. On the other hand, I was anticipating a dissonance from my lack of experience to handle entire ethnographic research on my own, with presenting myself confidently as a researcher and being perceived as such.

During the fieldwork itself, as shown above, my reflections were shaped by my daily interactions not only with my interlocutors but also with other people I have met and crossed paths with while in Armenia. The major challenge was to detect the nuance of the question why-are-you-here and to orientate my answer accordingly. As a result, I couldn't simply prepare a polished account of why I am interested in Armenia and Artsakh and why I have chosen to study the question of self-determination. The tone of the question was shifting. In a conversation with a project manager from an international NGO, the question why-are-you-here could imply not only why I'm in Armenia, but also why I have decided to contact them, what in their projects is relevant for my research, and how I intend to present their work. A member of diaspora would frequently ask me why-are-you-here after finding out that unlike them, I do not have Armenian heritage and the one perceived similarity we shared was shattered – with them, I had to present my motivation, simultaneously also being cautious not to validate their drive with my narration. By contrast, in everyday chats the why-are-you-here would often convey why, of all the places I could have gone to, I decided to come to Armenia.

This practice of using why-are-you-here as a doorway to calibrate our understanding towards each other and as a process of making sense of complex often unspoken of or indirectly alluded to experience of self-determination carried over to the reflection following the completion of the fieldwork. In retrospect, I had to evaluate how my answers reflected in the relationships I created with the respective research partners, and subsequently in their responses. As well as how our exchange on the matter of my positionality was shaped by the different politics of the field. Because of the research question and the overall grasp on the conflict I have

demonstrated, and alongside details such as me trying to learn Armenian or that I have been in contact with local colleagues, made me appear as an ally for some, as an ambassador for the Nagorno-Karabakh issue for others or as an "expert" who can suggest a path to a much desired solution.

An exciting, although also considerably frightening conclusion from all this, is that the question why-are-you-here continues to modify my position and provoke new reflections long after the face to face contact is over.

(3) THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY

At the very beginning of exploring the meaning of self-determination for Armenians as an entanglement between official narratives (legal on the international level and political on the local) and what people make of the concept based on their experience, I knew that this research is bound to a particular temporality, which has to be appropriately accounted for and reflected upon. Early on I encountered a quite fitting way of expressing the complexity of this moment in an analytical piece written by the Artsakh-born journalist Anush Ghavalyan. Her article was published in early January 2021 – the shock of the war was still fresh, but an acceptance of the new normal after the November 9 agreement has started to settle in Artsakh and Armenia. Inevitably, a serious part of this process of coming to terms was found in making sense of what went wrong leading to and during the war, and in the months after, when the ceasefire agreement came into effect and began forcefully tweaking the reality of life in Nagorno-Karabakh, and by extension in Armenia. Publicly, in Armenia, some of this sense-making was manifested in the anti-government protests, which agitated additionally the political crisis in the country following the defeat in the war. In my memory, the news coming from Artsakh at this time was mostly related to patching up the shattered state of the de facto state and pursuing some kind of stability. Against this backdrop, Ghavalyan reflects on the war as a clash between a rising democracy and a scot-free autocracy, and how sticking to it the label of regional conflict conceals the devastating impacts this war bears on democracy and attempts for democratic self-governance worldwide. She also notes, and here is the phrase I clasped to, that the new status quo after the war brings an even more uncertain future and a "neither peace nor war" present (Ghavalyan, 2021), in which the already delicate struggle for self-determination is going to face new challenges.

On the one hand, it is the *neither peace nor war* prospect that produces uncertainty. But there is also the logic of self-determination, which as we have explored above is at its core ambiguous and uncertain. And if we analyse self-determination as a continuous process, as this text proposes, we see that the struggle for self-determination is another aspect that adds to this feeling of uncertainty that is so widespread and shared in the Armenian society as a whole. On the other hand, the said uncertainty, which as we will see below can have different faces—emergency, displacement, political change etc., determines the actions of people,

restricting them to the *neither peace nor war* modus operandi of sense making and struggling to sustain the course of self-determination in this new context.

Ghalvayan's *neither peace nor war* framing kickstarted in my mind a sequence of associations towards transferring this ubiquitous perception of temporal and existential in-betweenness into theoretical terms. Taking the hypothesis of the right to collective self-determination as a continuous process as a main frame of reference, I decided to approach the *neither peace nor war* or "the paradigm of uncertainty" as referred to by some of my interview partners through the logic of the concepts of liminality and state of limbo. I find them to be a particularly fitting device to dissect how the uncertainty in this specific moment of the conflict and of the process of self-determination is conceived. Also, on a more overall level, I think that these notions coming from the rites of passage theory, i.e. adapted to understand the different stages of change additionally helps to imagine self-determination as a process and how this can be a productive approach.

Before we move to the concrete examples of how my interlocutors define uncertainty, let us revise how the theoretical backbone of liminality, or state of limbo as used in more recent transdisciplinary studies, addresses the issue. When we think of liminality from a classical anthropological perspective, at a first sight the concept does not align with the idea of uncertainty, as much as it tries to encompass the process of transition. The first theoretical entry that deals with the significance of social transitioning as a sort of human universal is Van Gennep's (1960) idea of rites of passage. Van Gennep coined the term, drawing inspiration from the dynamics in different religious worlds and groups, in which the religious rituals and ceremonies can be observed as rites of passage with a traceable structure and outcomes. He proposes to expand the rationale of rites of passage to other domains of life, considering the increasing levels of secularisation. This leads to the suggestion that we can apply the idea of rites of passage to different types of social mobility e.g. a peasant becoming an urban worker or a layman becoming a priest (ibid.: 1) or to biographical transitions that are considered milestones of equal significance in different cultural contexts e.g. entering adulthood through puberty, marriage, death (ibid.: 3). In the original conception, Van Gennep acknowledges that these rites of passage are inherently dynamic and thus breaks them down into a scheme, which "theoretically includes preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation), in specific instances these three types are not always

equally important or equally elaborated" (ibid. 11). With this research I attach importance and elaborate precisely on the liminal rites, i.e. rites of transition which take place at the threshold phase of the transformation. Consequently, liminality has been more frequently the focal point of research, as reaching and passing through this threshold is understood as peak transition. Victor W. Turner (1977/1969) is notoriously known for his work on the subject, which promoted the centrality of the liminal phase above separation and incorporation, as the aspect of transition most worthy of in-depth analysis. In his endeavour to expand our understanding of liminality, Turner first contests the idea of *state* of transition and suggests substituting it with *status* or *office* (Turner, 1977/1969: 94). Turner argues that the former determines the transition as a fixed, stable, recurrent and hence a predictable condition, which contradicts the idea that it is inherently impermanent and variable. By focusing solely on liminality, Turner also illuminates the conditions of passage and the characteristics of the passenger(s):

> The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. (ibid.: 95)

The threshold people themselves and their actions are impacted by liminality, and have the ability to reciprocate liminality. Turner also notes that under liminality we can observe the emergence of specific hierarchies, in which the liminal entity is always in a position of inferiority or marginality, stuck in a "limbo of statuslessness" (ibid. 97) where granting *it* recognition is essential for forging human bonds and in result legitimate societies.

While Turner develops these ideas in relation to individual rites of passage such as entering adulthood or applies it to the development of communitas and their potentiality, I can't help but connect these thoughts to the situation of Armenians following the ceasefire agreement. Moreover, something drew my attention while revising Van Gennep's text, namely when he talks of scaling up the concept of rites of passage so that it matches the rites underwent by groups not only by individuals. He remarks that we can consider the declaration of war as one of such collective rite of separation (ibid.: 39). In the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and by

extension how Artsakh-Armenians have been trying to realise their right to self-determination preceding and during the conflict, I suggest that the recurring ceasefires epitomise the phase of prolonged liminality.

The context of social disruption in Artsakh and Armenia is created by two parallel processes, that are interdependent and intertwined, nevertheless follow different path. On the one hand is the strive for self-determination, on the other – the proliferation of the armed conflict, with its periods of escalation and "frozen" ceasefire. This context of social disruption in turn creates the current state of limbo manifested in the tense ceasefires, in which Armenians find themselves constantly expecting the next war to erupt. Artsakh and to a lesser extent Armenia are stranded in the limbo of statuslessness, if we look at the ceasefire from the vantage point of the self-determination of a de facto state. Aliyev's narrative of victory, on the other hand, aims at pressing Armenians in a position of inferiority, and marginality. These are two of many examples, which can be found in the research context, that display the liminal conditions. The "stage of limbo, as a social condition, produces a continuum" (Hartonen et al., 2021), which spills over legal, political, social aspects of life and reinforces the feelings of uncertainty and insecurity.

The person who brought up the subject of uncertainty most passionately in our conversation was Tigran*, raising the idea of the paradigm of uncertainty that with the current ceasefire is even more tightly wrapped around the life of Armenians, and in his words defines the actions not only politically but also on individual level. When we spoke of Artsakh's struggle for independence, he noted that perceptions of what an independent or self-determined Artsakh looks like have changed dramatically pre and post the 2020 war. "Uncertainty is not new, but the war made it more acute and changed the attitudes of people, and what they are ready to do. Pre-war self-determination of Artsakh meant not to live under Azerbaijan, this is still the main priority, but we also have to save as much as possible" (Tigran*, 09.08.2022). To my question what is up for saving, Tigran* answered: "land of course, but not only. Also, autonomy, integrity, and most importantly connections to Armenia, this we can preserve best if we have access to the territories and people in Artsakh can live there unthreatened." (ibid.). Following this exchange, I tuned up myself to be more sensitive and receptive to hints that indicate uncertainty, how it shapes the perceptions of the current situation and in turn influences how self-determination is cognized under these circumstances. As I have noted earlier, for my interlocutors uncertainty is

present, but it does not manifest for all of them in the same way, and in their accounts they illuminate different faces of uncertainty, which are closely bound to their professional and personal backgrounds. Below, we will have a closer look at three such faces that made an impression during the interviews. These are uncertainty as emergency response, uncertainty and the insecurities of displacement, and the uncertainty of the new status quo.

3.1 Uncertainty, urgency, and emergency relief

Emergency response and relief were big subjects in the expert interviews. The main reason for this being that this was the entry point through which my expert interlocutors engaged with the conflict professionally. On a personal level as Armenians, also being related to someone who is affected by the conflict or the prospects of future escalations[6], I suspect they would have brought different perspectives, but these personal angles remained undisclosed in our conversations due to what I perceived as limitations of the work affiliations. This is also visible in the vocabulary that they use – predominantly they stick to Nagorno-Karabakh/ NK, not only in the official materials that they showed me bearing the logos of international donors, but also when they talk about their work. There was one notable exception to this — a local organisation that partners with international ones, during the interview the representatives shared that while in documents it is necessary to use NK, in unofficial settings and most of all when they work with conflict-affected people they use it interchangeably with Artsakh. On that note, especially for those who represent organisations branching out of international bodies, which cannot carry out activities in Artsakh due to its de facto status, there are rigid regulations on how to respond to the short- and long-term impacts of the conflict, not only in time of acute crisis but also during the periods when it is deemed frozen.

The scope and severity of the 2020 war allowed my interlocutors and their respective organisations to get involved in different activities aiming at providing help and logistical, social and psychological support to people affected and displaced by the military actions. While the

[6] Armenia has a mandatory military service for young men from the age of 18 to 27. All men aged 27 to 50, who served, are registered as reservists and can be drafted in the case of national mobilisation. Through this tangent, many families perceive themselves as affected by the conflict and the overall intensifying security situation in Armenia. This holds true even for people who don't have close family members who have served during the 1st or 2nd Karabakh war. According to the November 9 agreement, Armenia withdrew all its physical presence from Artsakh and discontinued its support to the unrecognised Artsakh Defence Army, but due to the situation on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border the above-mentioned perceptions of being directly affected carry over.

framework of urgency was incapacitating for many, it allowed these organisations to operate in full capacity. The emergency response took place predominantly during the war, but some initiatives were prolonged to the weeks after the ceasefire, as the conditions of the agreement and the winter weather meant that the most vulnerable population, namely the displaced from Artsakh, did not have the capacity to bounce back to the life and living conditions from before the crisis. As previously mentioned, the expert interviews were strictly bound to the nature of work of the organisations, so we barely deviated from the work taking place on the ground and the timeline of projects implemented since 2020 became the prism through which they shed light on the situation. With only one exception, a charity project launched by an individual during the war, in this case the personal experience played a central role for the campaign. Our conversations covered projects that were implemented ad hoc to alleviate the suffering of the ongoing war, but also follow-up projects that aimed at providing a more long-term and less emergency oriented assistance to the conflict affected population.

From the theoretical perspective of liminality and state of limbo the state of emergency does not exactly embody the threshold of transition, more likely emergency can be interpreted as an impromptu reaction to externally imposed demands for transformation. In other words, this is not the natural course of a rite of passage, but is initiated by force. Urgency and the motions of delivering emergency relief and response proliferate different perceptions of time. My interlocutors described it as some sort of asynchronous moment in time – urgency occurs and exists as if separately from the status quo of uncertainty, it unfolds parallel to events happening "outside our crisis", "the rest of the world [where] normal life continues", yet in retrospect every urgency has its specific place in the timeline of the conflict. Bandak (2023) suggests considering urgency as one possible pace of crisis that alternates with latency.

> The latter [latency], the slow crisis, rarely seems as vibrant and dynamic as the urgent crisis. What is chronic appears to have no end, and it seems only to be stuck, with neither entry nor exit in sight, and hence much more difficult to engage with. We need to pay attention to the politics of urgency without dismissing the fact that we find certain situations mandatory to act on sooner rather than later. (ibid.: 26)

The logic of alternating paces of crisis is very applicable for the frozen conflict. This concept is also useful for understanding how uncertainty operates under urgency, so that we better grasp how it transforms under or interacts with the pace of latency. One of my interlocutors, whose

roots are from the Armenian diaspora from across the Atlantic, noted in his story taking me back to the first week of the war that "it was the beginning of the war, so we didn't know how long, how hard and how bad it will get" (Ararat*, 22.07.2022).

I spoke to him because, like many other diaspora-Armenians, the uncertainty of the urgent, acute crisis mobilised him and through his initiative I have contacted him as an expert, who coordinated emergency relief. A variety of reasons prevented him from being physically mobilised into action, i.e. to serve as a volunteer, but he had a strong inner drive to do something, he "couldn't just sit and watch" (ibid.). This is how Ararat* ended up mobilising his community resources to raise money for emergency aid. Although he deviates from the likeness of a civil society expert or humanitarian aid officer, his is a particularly interesting case, as it shows how the urgency triggered collective mobilisation from the grassroots as well. The first fundraiser and the following campaigns organised by him were opportunities for people to contribute, to join the struggle, even if from far away. Especially for other diaspora-Armenians this was an "outlet" for the feelings of frustration and anxiety from being helpless and immobilised by the distance — for people "just like me, other Armenians in the US, Canada, Europe, my friends, who could only follow it online" (ibid.). What stood out in the conversation with Ararat* was his reiteration that his work showed that "every Armenian can do something valuable to help" and that at first he did not even suspect how much his contacts and the social resource of his community abroad shared the feeling of "not being able to just sit and watch" and materialised their responsibility towards "fellow Karabakh-Armenians" in the form of donations.

Ararat*'s remark on not knowing how long the war will last was mutually endorsed by every other person I spoke to. The difference is that Ararat's* reaction to this uncertainty produced by the emergency of war to mobilise himself and his close circle was somewhat of an emotional response – in the not-knowing it was pertinent for him to act, to do something to create at least some instance of assurance both for those who are directly affected, but also for those (like him) who because of the distance or other reasons cannot act otherwise. On the other hand, the *professional* experts, i.e. people whose work revolves around humanitarian aid and development, projects not only at the time of crisis, reacted or at least spoke of their reaction to the beginning of the war with more pragmatism. When they were telling about the first days of the war and the first waves of needs for emergency response, they were explaining it through the preparedness already existing in place and the provisional efforts to increase it:

> When the war started, as we were working in many of the regions, we could really response very quickly [...] we were just in October already, the first days of October, very close to the border in Syunik region. We started 2020 beginning of October with internal funds, it was just basic hygiene needs, bedding items, linen, very small amounts of food – the first necessary things, later we received donor support. And first, what about Syunik — it is the first checkpoint after Gharabagh, so when people were leaving they could come through Syunik and many people's first stop was Goris. (Ani* & Nare*, 13.07.2022)

> Because Goris has many empty hotels [the war took place during Covid-19 lockdown, in result of which many public and private facilities were closed], so many of the displaced people could have been hosted there, I think the maximum capacity was 10 000 during the war. (Ani* & Nare*, 13.07.2022)

> As the conflict started we started supporting them, lots of people were coming, thousands I can say were requesting for support, so we started working 7 days a week and were making needs assessment to respond to the immediate needs of the displaced people. (Anush*, 16.07.2022)

From the perspective of these organisations, the mobilisation of resources – human, logistical, financial – at the face of emergency was not underlined with the feeling of making oneself useful or delivering valuable contribution for the collective struggle. Providing emergency relief, humanitarian aid and legal, social and psychological services for the displaced is part of their core organisational capacity. Unlike in the case of Ararat*, whose individual emergency response endeavour aimed at also *taming* the uncertainty of war he was subjected to, for the experts from the organisations the work in emergency modus created an opportunity to offset previous inabilities to navigate the overall uncertainty of the protracted conflict. Conducting "comprehensive assessments so that people can be referred to other relevant services in the field when needed" (Anush*, 16.07.2022) or developing "effective strategies for integration, also taking into account that this might be the first of many relocations" (Hasmik* & Arpi*, 20.07.2022) were the main accompanying activities that required knowledgeable, multi-stakeholder action, taking place alongside the provision of temporary material security, food, and shelter. At the time of emergency, these experts had the opportunity to counteract uncertainty with concrete steps and measures. Plus, at least as perceived from the interviews, they were not as directly impacted by the emergency as they interpret the later feelings of social, political and security-related uncertainty brought upon all Armenians after the ceasefire

agreement. Hasmik* and Arpi*, as an example, conveyed the message that for them the work-related uncertainty increased after the symbolic conclusion of the emergency period. They observed that for their team, as well as for many partner organisations, it seemed very difficult to get out of the humanitarian aid and emergency relief working modus:

> Humanitarian aid should be an ad hoc response. What do you do if the immediate threat is averted – I'm sure you are already aware that the threat is not gone? We can't keep providing everyone with everything. People need different things – one may need a pen, another one a phone, a notebook. Our job is not to provide material support – year and a half later there are still actors who do that – but it's counterproductive. We should mobilise resources, navigate a network of connections to empower the displaced or otherwise affected by conflict. It is difficult but at some point we gotta stop with this constant provision, people become dependent on the aid and this does not foster autonomy. (Hasmik* & Arpi*, 20.07.2022)

In retrospect, they elaborated that the emergency of the war is the key to the current feeling of uncertainty, at least from the point of view of their professional reflection. There is more uncertainty in the lack of emergency, also because there are less clear urgent demands to be addressed. Second, the remnants of the previous emergency are still echoing and create a risk to deprive the society of ability and willingness to act to restore much needed "autonomy" and resilience.

Much like in Bandak's proposal, emergency is understood as one pace of the conflict. The observations of my interlocutors illustrate, however, that in the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict the slow crisis pace with which emergency alternates is a pace of uncertainty, my interlocutors will hardly describe it as latency. Both emergency and uncertainty have the power to mobilise, but they impact differently the different actors. What is more, the examples from above show that urgency and uncertainty reinforce each other. These two modes of crisis don't appear individually and don't always have the same characteristics. The overall uncertainty regarding how the conflict will *evolve* has significantly increased since 2016, hence some degree of uncertainty was palpable before the 44-days war. Nonetheless, the urgency of the 2020 was unequivocally dire and relentless, and the uncertainty it was followed by was even more starkly modified by that.

3.2 Uncertainty of displacement

Another concrete instance in which uncertainty makes itself tangible even for an outsider are the circumstances of forced displacement. According to the official figures provided by the Armenian Migration Service to the UNHCR local office, during the war in 2020 around 91 000 individuals were displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia (UNHCR Armenia, 2021a). Many of them returned to their homes in Artsakh soon after the November 9 agreement was signed, but a significant number decided to stay in Armenia. Those who stayed waited for the situation to stabilise, for the territorial provisions of the November 9 agreement to be implemented (i.e. control over lands to be given to Azerbaijan), so that they can re-imagine their lives back in Artsakh according to the new maps. Later UNHCR reports traced the return figures from Armenia to Artsakh documenting that as of July 2021 some 37 000 Artsakh-Armenians were in Armenia (UNHCR Armenia, 2021b), the number of people as of December 2021 was about 26 725 (UNHCR Armenia, 2022). Slowly, slowly people were gathering the courage to return, and these decisions were encouraged by strong voices both in Armenia and in Artsakh. Officials, organisations, and individuals were calling for people to return, during that time there were significant financial and intellectual efforts in place to map out what investments and initiatives are needed first to recover from the destruction of war, and second to strengthen the social and economic resilience of those who come back. I had a chance to witness in person how some of these efforts were progressing, and a more lengthy discussion of this will follow soon. But in order to understand the uncertainty, and especially the uncertainty from the perspective of those who remained displaced, it is important to acknowledge that the call for return was not convincing for all.

There were people who made a conscious choice not to return to Artsakh. For some the reasoning behind this was that their homes, villages, and cities were no longer under Armenian control – in their mind they couldn't return home, and it was too much to ask from them to relocate elsewhere. At one meeting with displaced people organised by a local municipality, a woman from Shushi shared with the participants: "how can I go and live in Stepanakert, knowing that my home is 20 minutes away, but I can never go back, and I will never know what happened with it. I can't imagine even going back to Karabakh… who knows maybe one day but not now – how can I get in the car and take to road to Shushi but never arrive there?" (Field notes,

08.09.2022). For others, even if they still had family in Artsakh or their homes were not destroyed or ceded to the Azeris, the thought of having to go once again through all they went through during the war was staggering. One of the mothers I spoke to in the community centre voiced this directly, "he [her son, 6 years old] keeps asking me when we will go back, I say — never. It's better to grieve now than to have to go through the war again" (Diana*, 27.07.2022). Another similarly blunt response to why one decides to sacrifice return to their home was told to me by another person, again through the perspective of motherhood:

> I lived my whole life in Artsakh. During the war we came to Armenia. I wanted to stay, but we came mostly because of my young daughter. I didn't want her to see the destruction of war and the constant terror in everybody's eyes. So, in early October we came here. After the agreement [ceasefire agreement] we went back and I felt, together with my husband that we had to decide what we'll do. We didn't want to live in that constant insecurity, it's not sustainable. So, we decided to come to Yerevan. (Gohar*, 13.09.2022)

My encounters certainly did not introduce me to all possible reasons that motivated some Artsakh-Armenians to stay in Armenia. It is also extremely important to mention that I did not manage to organise meetings with more vulnerable communities of Artsakh-Armenians, whose livelihood was precarious due to being displaced. My interlocutors from Artsakh, even if not yet having the job and housing security they used to have before the war, and before they relocated to Armenia, noted that they have family and strong community, on which they can count on. With this in mind, I still got a good glimpse into how these decisions to not return emerged from tiresome internal (within the person but also within the family) arguments fuelled by emotions, trauma, sense of loyalty and belonging, desire for stability and security, grief and disappointment and feelings of honour and duty towards those who fought for independence, but also wanting to spare their children and themselves the possibility of experiencing first-hand a new war.

Also, not all of Artsakh-Armenians I spoke to were *displaced* in the sense synonymous to forced migration, which puts the individuals in precarious social, legal, and economic circumstances making them dependent on government or otherwise support. Before moving to discussion of how in my conversations uncertainty was overall made more palpable through narratives of displacement, it is first necessary to open a parenthesis. In the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict the issue of displacement is a major one, which sadly has affected

many on both sides of the conflict Armenians, and Azeris, and as of the time of my research the threat of more waves of displaced was impending. This issue is starkly mirrored in the lack of consensus on what vocabulary to use to describe the affected, displaced population. It is notable that this problem is equally applicable for Azerbaijanis who were displaced after the 1st Karabakh war and for the Armenians who fled during the military actions of the 2nd. Internally displaced is avoided because *internally* implies some degree of recognition of the contested territory. For some reason, my subjective interpretation is again to maintain "impartiality", during the 2020 war the term *forcibly displaced* was avoided by international organisations, who mostly opted to use *persons in refugee-like situations*. The displaced Artsakh-Armenians are certainly not asylum seekers, but if one asks – are they refugees? – it would be considered a provocative question. On the one hand, from the viewpoint of the *neutral* observer, they cross an internationally recognized border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. On the other hand, however, they cross the internationally *unrecognised* border between Armenia and the Republic of Artsakh, a border that has existed without formal recognition for almost 30 years. This conundrum of how to *label* people who flee from the war is a direct continuation of the across-the-board tiptoeing in speech, and along these lines also in action, around the notion of self-determination of the de facto state. An unspoken consensus has been reached, at least from what I have collected and observed in the field, to use displaced peoples. At the time of the research it seemed as the option that most appropriately balances sensitivity towards the experiences and the current situation, without being perceived as somewhat offensive – insensitive towards the displaced themselves, and for those who oppose the idea of Artsakh's existence. The second point in this detour is a reminder to the reader that displaced Artsakh-Armenians are in the very particular situation of being displaced amongst their own people, as one of my interlocutors called them *"endemic refugees"*:

> Whichever way you look it in relation to migration, refugees, reaction to refugees the people from Artsakh are invisible in this discourse. We welcome them like one of us because they are [one of us], but also they have the mentality of being independent Artsakhtsi. That's one thing, but also they have nowhere else to go. You know from Ukraine people have so many ways to go, to become seen. People from Artsakh could only come here. I don't know, maybe if Georgia had opened the borders some would've gone, I don't know. But they are here, and unlike other refugees they are endemic and because of that invisible for the outside… (Hasmik*, 20.07.2022)

There is a lot of research on people who have been (internally) displaced to a host community of the same ethnicity, culture, religion, etc. I have familiarised myself with some works in search of advice how to navigate, first, these contested designations of displacement and second, what concerns and tensions have been recorded in cases adjacent to internal displacement or displacement amongst "one's own" (e.g. Brun, 2003; Mooney, 2005). With this remark I want to acknowledge this specificity, however in the scope of this research it is not possible to dig deeper into these dynamics of displacement.

What I examine here as an intersection of displacement and uncertainty are the instances in which the particular insecurities of prolonged and sometimes recurrent displacement are exacerbated or in turn exacerbate the feeling of uncertainty. Looking again at some remarks from the expert interviews, the projects that were still ongoing in the summer of 2022 show what are some of the practical challenges, which those, who have decided to stay or are yet undecided, have to face:

> The second issue is the housing issue, because most of them are currently renting houses. At first, they were living in communal centres provided by the government but currently most of them are living in rented houses and paying rent is a real problem for them. Because they, most of them, have low income or no income. [...] The main issues is that it is hard for them to get jobs, to be self-reliant. And there are two factors for this. First is aaahm, it takes time for them to come to the mind that they need to have a job, still need to continue to live in Armenia because it will take time to get back to Nagorno-Karabakh. And the second issue is that in Armenia we already have issues in the job market, so it is twice harder to get a job for displaced people. (Anush*, 16.07.2022)

Housing, jobs, schooling for the children continued to be burning issues for a significant part of the displaced population. On one hand, this was due to the system failing to address the long-term needs and demands of the displaced, as one woman voiced her irritation: "I am not saying that you [representatives of the municipality and development organisations] don't care. You ask me what work do I want? I want to work what my profession is, but you tell me you can work at the shop or there is a new vocational training. I'm a teacher, that's what I want to work." (Field notes, 08.09.2022). On the other hand, I have been told about cases in which even if people find temporary security they keep their eyes open for better opportunities, which disrupts the newly found stability. When I spoke to the founder of the children's centre, this was one of the issues she brought up:

> It is true that many families from Artsakh who have decided to stay, had to relocate, some of them a couple of times. And this is most difficult for the children, but if the parents find a better job or a better home elsewhere, I understand why they go. In the centre, we have two families that relocated. One of them have relatives in the town, so every time they visit, they come to see us too. The other one also keeps in touch and comes with us whenever we organise an excursion. This is for the kids mostly to not lose their friends and community, but also for the parents I think. We adults also found some security [in the centre], and you never know what will happen next. (Hripsime*, 27.07.2022)

In this situation of displacement, finding opportunities for financial stability, or an affordable home for the family, can mean that people should sacrifice stability in other areas of life, as an example the social stability and community they have found and relied on in the time of crisis. In the interview with Gohar*, who admits that her situation is better than of many Artsakh-Armenians, who did not return, we talked about how the material and livelihood uncertainty is intertwined with this larger existential uncertainty, so often talked about when they reminisce about their experience before and after the war. It is interesting how she compares between old fears from the time between the 1st and 2nd wars, and how they mix with and overflow into the feeling of the new uncertainty after the ceasefire:

> I know so many people in the villages [in Artsakh] who love their homes, they really do. But they never invested in their houses. Don't make them more comfortable, don't buy new things, they don't do anything just live as they do. And they love these homes really but they think or are afraid that if they invest, this money will go to nothing. What if their village is next? What if they have to relocate? Leave everything behind? It's less pain in the future if they don't renovate. I imagine some people like that are here now, see this is how they cope with the future and they bring it here. Life in the conflict zone is different, but after 2016 and more after the war people here started sharing the same feeling, they are learning how to cope. (Gohar*, 13.09.2022)

It is a speculation that the displaced who decided to stay in Armenia will bring these, let's provisionally call them, practices to decrease future vulnerabilities. But this line of thought displays the capacity of the displaced and relocants to relate to the uncertainty through temporal and spatial comparisons, which is something that in turn shows the layers in which this frozen conflict is dynamic. As Gohar* hints — this feeling of living between peace and war is nothing new either for a person from Stepanakert, or for a resident of Yerevan, but it was much stronger

and tangible for Karabakh-Armenians than for the majority of Armenians in Armenia. For the more than 30 years of conflict, the intensity of this has been changing, but also the spatial proximity of the escalations has played a role as to how it is perceived as an impending threat – "we all knew that it [the conflict] is not over, some made themselves not to think about it, but the war reminded that everything we know, also in Armenia, can be lost" (Field notes, 08.09.2022).

3.3 Navigating the new normal

While the urgency and displacement are two very distinctive modalities that make uncertainty more definable and certainly more explicit, they allow us to approach it through a crisis modus. This crisis modus, be it the urgency of war or military escalations, or the unpredictability of life in the result of temporary or prolonged forced displacement, is the one side of the coin. The other side manifests during the periods of so-called latency, when the acute crisis boils down to mundane uncertainty. My interlocutors were eager to communicate that the feeling of uncertainty is not only reactive to large-scale events or major socio-political shifts, but that even when it has become part of everyday life, it does not tint everything with fear and worry. At the time of my research, nearing two years after the war, normal life was fully restored in Armenia and in Artsakh. In fact, as per the accounts of my interlocutors and the official efforts streamlined in the media, the restoration of some kind of (new) normality had begun with small steps with the signing of the ceasefire agreement. It is hard for me to convey the feeling of uncertainty, without falling into the trap of drawing a picture of a war-torn and constantly distressed reality of life, which is not the truth. The uncertainty my interlocutors talked about, which eventually became such a gravitational force for this analysis, is present but is also opaque, and is not always directly referred to. The war and subsequently the ceasefire brought the uncertainty from the background to the fore in the minds of people, yet this feeling does not interfere in a hampering and obstructive way with people navigating their post-war every day life and coming to terms with the changes, ongoing and anticipated that can come from the post November 9 agreement established status quo.

In this new normal, uncertainty appears as the dry joke that the Azeris can attack tomorrow or "to enjoy Artsakh while it lasts"; for some it can materialise as reluctance to follow the news altogether or a conscious decision to disengage from the processes of political

decision-making, since it is considered not a representative course of action. There are people who fixate on the conflict and the multiple streams of issues sprouting out of the momentary solution of the ceasefire agreement — one affecting first and most directly Artsakh, of course the issues of the conflict-affected populations, the implications for Armenia's internal affairs and the country's foreign policy vector, etc. The people, who are caught up in these issues, elaborate on the present as "the last chance to find peace". Some people became increasingly judgemental towards what they perceive as apathy towards the common struggle among the people in their circles. One way or another, all these reactions are linked to the feeling of uncertainty. Based on the observations and the conversations I had, uncertainty can be understood as an entry point for individual and collective reflection on the liminal present, the prism through which to interpret one's own understanding of this recently heightened *neither peace nor war* stage of the conflict. And I find this notion of uncertainty, on the one hand as something experienced, on the other as something that I try to substantiate with theory, so appealing because it unlocks a variety of outlooks on the conflict. It is important to know that these varying outlooks, rooted in reflection on the uncertainty, are almost predominantly engaged with temporality. Therefore, here I want to take a moment to look into these more "mundane" reflections on uncertainty from three different temporal perspectives.

For many this reflection was focused on the present, which is not a surprise and as I have established already the ceasefire agreement quite significantly changed the security, political and social architecture in Artsakh and in Armenia and with this how the present feels. To illustrate this engagement with the present, I will return to my conversation with Gohar*, who was very introspective altogether on how her perception of time has been altered by growing up and living through periods, each differently modified by the conflict:

> You know I told you how for me life in conflict is different. But so is time sometimes. For example, life before the war feels like it was so long ago. Like a distant memory. And yet we don't have time after the war to get our strengths back, because we are constantly expecting for it to start again. When we won in the First War, Azerbaijan had 30 years to stand up. They don't give us that time. Sometimes it's shelling, sometimes it's threats, sometimes it's cutting the gas – but whatever it is we don't have time to breathe. (Gohar*, 13.09.2022)

For Gohar* the uncertainty of the present is very much without a past and without a future. When we spoke about her past, it was distanced from the present. In other parts of our exchange

she acknowledged past feelings of uncertainty, but they were not presented as strongly as the feelings of Armenians collectively "not having time to breathe", i.e. to recuperate, to prepare, to increase at least capacity for defence and ensuring higher levels of human security. Gohar* bounds the present with constant expectation for a new escalation. The mentioned practices of intimidation: occasional shelling and ceasefire violations, cutting or disturbing the gas supply, or verbal threats by Azerbaijani officials are indeed ordinarily used to remind Karabakh-Armenians, first, of the new power/military imbalance and second, that the ceasefire is not a solution towards permanent peace. Following the 2020 war, such intimidation practices in different shape and form, not only what Gohar* listed, became a commonplace. Starting with the Victory parade organised by Azerbaijani President Aliyev in December 2020; followed by the opening of a Military Trophy Park in Baku, in which war trophies seized by the Azerbaijani Army during the war are displayed for tourist purposes; the objections from the Azerbaijani side to advance the negotiation process on exchange of prisoners of war; and the steady online circulation of videos depicting Azerbaijani soldiers desecrating and destroying private properties, cultural and historical sites, memorials, and cemeteries in the territories ceded to Azerbaijan — are among some of these normalised and highly publicised intimidation practices, which perpetually heighten the anticipation of new escalations. This quote of Gohar* is particularly interesting, because we spoke on September 13, the day that the Armenian border was attacked, and in this context is why I suggest considering her perception of the present uncertainty as distant not only from the past, but from the future as well. She perceived the attacks as the manifestation of these threats, as culmination of her expectations and an action that proves uncertainty is substantiated and not a product of fears and trauma. In her perception, this large-scale escalation wasn't going to trigger any big change, internally and externally. Gohar* viewed and felt the developments on the border as tragic, she mourned the loss of life, but in the same she was prepared for such a scenario, which was made evident in how we greeted each other. When I met with her at the agreed time and spot, first I asked her how she was doing today and that I wasn't sure if she wanted to proceed with the interview. Her response was: "Ah, not very good, you know with everything happening. We are prepared and ready, that every day the war can start again. But still it is so sad, so many victims already." (ibid.). As a major takeaway from my entire exchange with her came the revelation that these border attacks were not understood automatically as

bringing the situation closer to a new war, but they solidified the feeling of uncertainty of the present, it was not a threshold to the future, but the next stage of the present.

In other situations, the uncertainty was reflected through the present but with an outlook towards how the present decisions will become the future. For instance, my interlocutor Narek acknowledged that the situation is shifting and unpredictable, which makes it very hard to make "right decisions" and to plan actions with "sustainable results". He also was keen to make the point that a large part of the uncertainty or unpredictability, even regarding local decisions, is determined by external actors. For him, the expectation of a next escalation was also central and was perceived as inevitable, but also useful to understand how uncertainty conditions people's capacity to engage. In this case, however, his attention was drawn to understand the other side's logics that will lead to an escalation:

> Their government grows hate, our government doesn't. Well, there are some parties that are growing hate. But it is normal, because when you are in war you must grow some hate, but if we are not going to war we have no any idea to grow hate against them [Azeri]… But they are going to attack… attack, attack, and attack. Their politics are built on that… on that ground, you must go kill Armenians, you must take your territories. (Narek, 12.09.2022)

Simultaneously, he was very adamant to underline how important it is to invest towards making decisions and mobilising people, precisely because the circumstances of unpredictability and constant change require having a plan. In Narek's case, acknowledging different aspects of the conflict such as the politically instrumentalized ethnic hatred and armenophobia is a key to understanding not only the roots of uncertainty, but also to create spaces to think of how to counteract uncertainty with an intent to contribute to a less uncertain future.

Logically, there are people who reflect on the uncertainty of the present as an outcome of the history of the conflict. In this stance, I have gained particularly interesting insights from one of the collaborative interviews, which I conducted with Hayk, a fellow researcher. We talked about the idea of uncertainty, how it is perceived collectively, but also how each person tries to make sense of it individually. Hayk suggested that one binding reaction regardless one's background is the attempt to imagine solutions and play out different scenarios varying from tragic to hopeful that can take place, emphasising that this was his own experience as well:

> For a long time I was looking for solutions in my head. I wasn't looking for solutions in my research but of course as a person who is involved in the subject for a long time, you start thinking about 'Hey, how can we resolve this? How long is this gonna last? Will I ever see a time in the future that the conflict will not exist any more? Can I call [inaudible] peaceful?' So, in your head you are constantly looking for these solutions. And, and … and as soon as it starts to feel like you are getting closer to a more or less peaceful situation something happens. And completely crashes your hopes and your visions. (Hayk, 11.09.2022)

> And just try to make the present [during the war] more, I guess, tolerable in a way. Aa, because once you understand the past if it you really also look at the present and you are like 'Oh my Gosh, this is quite repetitive'. Things don't really come up as new to you any more, because it's like - yeah, this happened in this year as well, oh yeah that happened as well, yeah. You feel like there's, we are - and that's also of course another part of depression - when you feel like you are in a loop that doesn't end. (ibid.)

Hence, the present uncertainty can be understood also through the repetitive cycles of violence that are part of the conflict, the alternating modes of crisis and latency as discussed above, and the fact that the heights of these recurrences have been squeezed in a timeframe with a duration of less than a lifetime. It is interesting how, in Hayk's case, the approach of imagining solutions happens through an examination of the past. Of course, it can be said that this is due to his professional background, but my interactions hint that it is common also for "non-experts". On the one hand, looking back and facing the "loop that doesn't end" intensifies the feeling of uncertainty and incapability to react and counteract meaningfully. On the other hand, looking into the past, in Hayk's words, "fleshes out the gaps in our knowledge, in our understandings, and subsequently in our capacity to engage" — these gaps are also something that unknowingly adds to uncertainty.

Before moving to the next section, let's return to the proposal from the beginning of the chapter that in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict the framework of the ceasefire after the 2020 war established this uncertainty, which can be understood as prolonged liminality. In this reading, all Armenians become *threshold people*, at the same time navigating the uncertainty collectively — political turbulences and increased security risks; while also facing some of the implications of this threshold on their own — having to figure out the life anew after displacement or developing coping mechanisms to reflect and react to the feeling of uncertainty. According to the ideas of Van Gennep and Victor Turner, the stage/ status of liminality is

followed by a phase of incorporation; it should transform or dissolve, as liminality is too intense and exhausting to sustain indefinitely. As we can see in the accounts above, from the viewpoints from within uncertainty, it is hard to estimate and imagine what the outcome of the uncertainty will be. Surely a peaceful resolution is desired, but part of the uncertainty's might is to consistently remind that there is a flip side to peace. While it is difficult, and not in the objectives of this research, to envision what the postliminal stage of the conflict will be, the examination of how uncertainty is understood allows us to carry over to different practices that potentially can sustain the struggle for self-determination in this phase of liminality, and perhaps one day can play a role in whatever comes next.

Interlude. We are our mountains

Just outside Stepanakert, direction north, a large monument depicting a man and a woman stands tall. This is the sculpture "We are our mountains" by the Armenian sculptor Sargis Baghdasaryan, which was installed in 1967 and since it has become the symbol of Artsakh. "We are our mountains" is layered with meanings, and its visual presence is ubiquitous. In fact, so ubiquitous that I believe that anyone who had looked into the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, had surely encountered some imagery relating to it. The monument is integrated in the coat of arms of the de facto Republic of Artsakh, and it exists in different forms as a souvenir. Moreover, during the 2020 war the image inspired various artworks and banners, which were used to show support for Artsakh in online and offline spaces.

Its official name "We are our mountains" evokes the deep bond with the land and the mountains, which are so integral to Armenian identity, but the interplay with the mountain-self doesn't end with the name. The silhouette of the sculpture resembles the two peaks of Mount Ararat, which are looming albeit from a distance over Yerevan. Just as Mount Ararat is this powerful and complex symbol for Armenia, "We are our mountains" encapsulates these meanings for Artsakh, and moreover, manifests the heritage of Armenian identity. The sculpture is also known as "տատիկ-պապիկ" (tatik-papik), which translates to grandma-grandpa. The two characters tatik and papik likewise convey significant messages. Their figures reinforce the idea of heritage and intergenerational continuity, and they are often spoken of as the guardians of the land and its people. I say that the monument is layered with meanings because even the material it is made of is very purposefully chosen, and can be interpreted as symbolic. The sculpture is carved out of tuff – the beautiful textured volcanic stone that is used all over Armenia and Artsakh, and is so emblematic for Armenian architecture. It is also said that Baghdasaryan deliberately built the monument directly on the ground, instead of placing it on a platform or pedestal, so that this sculpture once again underlines the connection between Armenians and their native land.

This is a very surface-level description of the role and the meaning-making capacity of the "We are our mountains" monument. It opens up such a substantial tangent, and its ubiquity is quite overwhelming, because of which I was intending to leave it out of the analysis altogether. The topic of its symbolic meaning for (Artsakh-) Armenian identity, together with the symbolism

of Mount Ararat, is so broad and again historically loaded that it deserves to be comprehensively explored on its own. What brought me back to consider how the numerous encounters with tatik-papik/ "we are our mountains" in the field has imprinted on the research, was the prologue by Fisch (2015) in his book "The Right of Self-Determination of Peoples: The Domestication of an Illusion". In this introductory segment, before jumping into the belly of the beast that is the notion of self-determination, he warms up the readers with a discussion of state symbols of power that are representative of national unity, sovereignty and thus ultimately actualized statist/secessionist aspirations – "the secessionists of yesteryear can become the defenders of national unity of today and vice versa" (Fisch, 2015: 7). Fisch discusses side by side the composition of the imperial palace in Beijing and Mao's mausoleum, the landscape of the National Mall and the surrounding complex of power in Washington DC and the subtle monumentalizing of Swiss General Guillaume-Henri Dufour in Geneva. He compares these examples against the backdrop of other notable cases in which political and military leaders had become the symbolic face of national unity. And he exemplifies how the common denominator in these cases is that these historical figures had impact on the territorial changes of the state and fundamentally the state formation. When I was reading this passage about grandiose architecture that is commemorating the legacy of past leaders, all I could think of in the context of Artsakh was the "We are our mountains" monument. Of course as everywhere else there are streets and settlements named after historical figures, Stepanakert itself is named after an Armenian Bolshevik revolutionary, but the symbolic significance of the tatik-papik sculpture prevails over the rest.

This contrast forced me to deliberate how the fact that "We are our mountains" can be considered as the main symbol for Artsakh, comes to light when we look into the movement towards self-determination. Regardless, if we read it as a symbol of national unity or secessionist aspiration, which is a legitimate stand given the de jure state lines, the semantics of the monument are evidently different from the examples presented by Fisch. Instead of invoking military or historic might personified in one significant figure, the monument depicts the collective self and the essence that drives the self-determination idea. On the one hand, the connection with the land and the identification with the mountains present in the "We are our mountains", on the other – the collective and intergenerational persistence conveyed with the vernacular tatik-papik.

Figure 2. *Gor's drawing. [cropped]*(Source: Sose Hanneyan [@sauccyy], Instagram 2021, Copyright © Sose Hanneyan, January 2021)

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ZARTONK ACADEMY
ARTSAKH 2022
RESILIENCE THROUGH MUSIC

Figure 3. *Logo Zartonk Academy 2022.* (Source: Zartonk Academy - Atken Armenian Foundation 2022, Copyright © Atken Armenian Foundation, 2022)

Figure 4. and **Figure 5.** *Children's art in community centre.* (Source: image taken by Elitsa Kapusheva, 01.09.2022)

(4) SELF-DETERMINATION AS A PRACTICE OF RESILIENCE

The previous chapter, focused on the discussion of uncertainty as a front of the status of liminality of Armenian society in the post-2020 realities. At a first glance, this may seem as somewhat of a deviation from the central question this text aims at sorting out, namely grasping how the notion of self-determination is understood and experienced. Yet it is necessary to understand the nuances of uncertainty in order to proceed to exploring people's opinions, awareness, and perceptions of self-determination and its role in the conflict, in the intersection of personal experiences, and public narratives. To return us to the course of analysis towards unearthing the meanings that self-determination bears for Armenians outside the prevailing legal and political discourse, I would like to briefly echo that the point of departure of this exploration is the understanding of self-determination as a continuous process. Inevitably, the unfolding of this process is powerfully shaped by the prevalent and commonly-shared sense of uncertainty among. With this temporality in mind, let us have a closer look at what perceptions and dynamics of self-determination have manifested throughout my field work and also how they play out in this atmosphere of uncertainty.

It is imperative to kick off this discussion with a remark on how I approached talking about self-determination with my interlocutors. In the introductory conversation, I relayed the topic of my research, with emphasis on my interest to understand self-determination through the personal insights of people who are affected or otherwise experientially involved with the conflict and with Artsakh's struggle for independence and recognition of the right to self-determination. However, in the course of the exchange, I did not ask directly what is self-determination for my interlocutors and how they define it. The initial reasoning behind the decision to avoid asking this directly was to provide space for people to bring in and work out their own reflections on the topic while we are conversing, and to explore more broadly their personal experiences from the past two years. I wanted to ensure that this space for reflection is as little as possible shaped by questions and triggers that generate associations with the predominant political narratives on the meaning and importance of self-determination for Armenians. Instead, I tried to instigate conversations that look into peoples bonds to Artsakh, how these bonds have been affected by all the developments and how they are sought to be preserved, commencing from the idea of person-centred interviewing. That is interviewing,

which enables the exploration of how community members are constituted by their contexts (Levy & Hollan, 2014: 313) and how in turn with their actions and various engagements they construct, enact and re-frame the said contexts.

It is perhaps worth to remind ourselves the short paragraph on the biographic portraits of my interlocutors and the relay the different experiences of uncertainty as determined by different life stories. Although I risk making this repetition irritating, I believe it is important to underline once again that the pool of my interlocutors was quite diverse not only in terms of personal experience and life-trajectories, but also in terms of closeness, i.e. level of personal, familial and even physical connectedness with Artsakh. For some people, the bond to Artsakh was damaged or completely lost due to the war; for others, it was re-discovered and perceived as a path to re-connecting to their Armenian identity; for third, "the cross" Armenians collectively carry, and so forth. When we talked about their bonds to Artsakh, they were predominantly being accounted for and disclosed through people's practical conduct and actions – individual, collective or organisational. Actions and practices to preserve and carry forward the bond to Artsakh and strengthen one's resilience to uncertainty and the possibility of future escalations were central and brought to the forefront of the conversations I had in the field. Verbs like *to activate, to mobilize, to stimulate, to make ready, to prepare* were omnipresent and recognized as the means to foster resilience. Resilience on the other hand was understood as something both deep-seated in Artsakh-Armenian's identity, but also as a collective aim, which is becoming increasingly important. These accounts prompted me to fundamentally rethink the main lens of exploration of perceptions of self-determination. That is to say, not through the personal narratives of self-determination, as much as through the narratives of practice and more specifically practices of and towards resilience. I should also clarify that I acknowledge that my findings are influenced by the channels and the contexts in which I contacted my research partners and by the fact that all of them are one way or another engaged in different initiatives. Nonetheless, these practices of resilience proved to be such a staple of the daily routines of my interlocutors and such a powerful outlet to conceiving and retelling their relationships to Artsakh that it was only reasonable to explore this in more depth. Before we delve into the nature of these practices, how they are intended to foster resilience and why I propose to understand them as by extension practices of self-determination, or at least practices that combined constitute the greater process

of self-determination, let us look into the theoretical roots of the notions of practice and resilience in anthropological scholarship.

Practice theory is almost inseparable from the anthropological and ethnographic study of social, cultural and political orders. Practices set up and help us to trace the reciprocal relationship between the societal structures and the individual agents that comprise them. And the research has shown that humans, although it can be argued that practices are not only inherent to the human species, engage in an array of practices with distinctive objectives, functions, and directions. One of the prominent scholars to lay the foundations of practice theory is Pierre Bourdieu, who, in parallel to his other key ideas, in the course of various works has explored the *logic* and complexity of social practice. In Bourdieu's outline of the social (theory of) practice, the practice is understood as the interweave of an encompassing structure, habitus, and individual's or group's agency:

> The system of dispositions - a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in practices structured according to its principles, an internal law relaying the continuous exercise of the law of external necessities (irreducible to immediate conjunctural constraints) - is the principle of the continuity and regularity which objectivism discerns in the social world without being able to give them a rational basis. And it is at the same time the principle of the transformations and regulated revolutions which neither the extrinsic and instantaneous determinisms of a mechanistic sociologism nor the purely internal but equally punctual determination of voluntarist or spontaneist subjectivism are capable of accounting for. (Bourdieu, 1977: 82)

Through practices, we weave a field of relationships (ibid.: 52) that produce and reproduce the structure and create the backdrop for future practices. In this examination practices are simultaneously considered as reactions and interpretations of the ongoing, and the agency is presented as the employment in effect of the other central bourdieusian notions of habitus, field, and capital. In *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu invites us to investigate the logic behind practices, including the logics dictated by the habitus, the field, and the different forms of capital; but also to challenge the idea that this logic is coherent and depends solely on the agency of people (Bourdieu, 1992: 86). His appeal is to understand practical logic, also practical in the sense of order-creating, as intersecting thoughts, perceptions, and actions that are acted upon in the context, and by the social structure and the agents. He suggests a circular understanding of

the logic of practice, in which the social system necessitates certain practices, which are not simply an outcome but also reproduce and generate a new version of the social order (ibid.). Another important aspect in Bourdieu's theory of practice is the acknowledgement that we juggle, engage with and participate in different types of practices guided by different situational rationale – ritual practices, scientific practices, etc. including, and this is exactly what this chapter is about, everyday practices. To understand these different practices emerging in specific contexts, we should be familiar with the *mode of being* of these particular contexts and the purposes they may evoke (ibid.: 97). Bourdieu's ideas are fundamental, but are surely not set in stone, and subsequently they raised a lot of reiterations and critique. Perhaps, the most lengthy and groundbreaking critique is developed by Stephen Turner in his book *The Social Theory of Practices: Tacit Knowledge and Presupposition.* He argues that the theory of practice is a too broad framework, which presents some sort of general collective proceedings that, although bound to the specific circumstances, are to an extent detached from experiences of the individuals, and the logic ignores how future actions are informed by people's interactions with the outcomes of practices. He is also critical towards the idea of one rigid overarching system that serves as the background of the collective practices. Instead, Stephen Turner suggest investigating the instrumental use of practice, questioning more in-depth how these practices interact with individual experiences, and how they constitute a process of developing tacit knowledge (Turner, 1994). Tacit knowledge, as in the establishment of (individual) habits, conventional understandings of the ongoing processes, as well as comprehension of how individual and collective actions (practice) reproduce and generate realities. In the context of my research it was useful to brush up my memory of both the classic theory of practice of Bourdieu and Turner's central critique, as the practices I came across share collective motivations arising from the conflict context; but are often informed by individual experiences and generate new personal realities. Moreover, the examples of practices that I have encountered through my interlocutors were disproportionate to one another, mostly due to asymmetric access to different resources, or in the sense of Bourdieu the different forms of capital. To adequately address these differences, and the decisive role of personal life stories leading to the current modes of engagement; as well as to be able to account how the historical and political arch of the conflict, the ceasefire, and ultimately the feeling of uncertainty incite such practices of resilience – I needed insights from both sides of the debate.

The main common theme in the conversations in the field was the vision that these practices and actions contribute to building up and strengthening the collective resilience. Much like uncertainty, the notion of resilience came in my range of vision and became so central for the research deriving from my interlocutors, who have been very vocal to emphasise the importance of resilience for Armenians. Initially, I was somewhat cautious to theoretically widen the scope to include the notion of resilience, as in the heart of this thesis I already dabble in ambiguous concepts. However, the interactions and the interviews have shown that the question of resilience is at the centre of attention for my interlocutors, as a process resulting from the developments of the conflict, but also closely related to people's capacity to deal with it. What is more, the strive for resilience was the main driving force behind all these projects, initiatives, campaigns, actions or in short *practices*, in which my interlocutors were engaged and were eager to make visible.

Resilience is one of the notions, which in the past 10 to 15 years has caused quite substantial ripples not only in the anthropological scholarship, but also interdisciplinary across the social sciences. It is not a new concept, although it is a rather recent development that we are trying to find the appropriate theoretical framework and methodology to put it in use for peoples and communities. Tracking down its history, we can see that the first conceptualizations of resilience appeared in the 70s, as part of the first wave of rigorous ecological and environmental research and public commotion on the topic. At the time, resilience was meant to describe the capacity of ecosystems and environments to withstand environmental change and to restore stability (Holling, 1973). With the advancement of research interest in the field of socio-environmental relationships, especially against the backdrop of the deepening climate crisis, the notion of resilience became also apt to analyse peoples and communities as subjects of resilience capable of restoring stability in terms of livelihood, security, preparedness against disasters etc. The track record of how resilience is used and conceptually refined, but also topically expanded, following this shift is fascinating, but it would remove us too far from the main theme. Recently Kathrin Eitel (2023) has very thoroughly summarized the history of the notion and how it is integrated in anthropological research, for those who are interested to understand this change of thought. What is important to take with us from the resilience discourse for the context of this research and for the forthcoming analysis, however, are two main points. First, for a long time resilience was understood as the ability of the affected entity

(it can be an ecosystem, but also a community) to "bounce back" to an earlier condition of stability – an adaptation to urgency and (critical) change that aims at restoring the balance from *before the crisis.* Second, while this definition was somewhat consistent, researchers across disciplines began criticizing the idea of *bouncing back*, insisting that a positive resilience should aim at *bouncing forward*, i.e. reinventing and rebuilding a new stability that transforms the vulnerabilities, which initially created or enabled conditions for a breakdown. The question – does resilience come closer to *bouncing back* or to *bouncing forward,* especially in the context of a cyclical (frozen) conflict and an ongoing process of negotiating self-determination? — emerged once I began sorting out the stories and references about resilience and practices towards resilience. In response, I would say that in the reality of my interlocutors, we observe a mixture of both.

Before zooming out from the theoretical overview to the concrete examples of everyday practices of resilience and their relation to uncertainty and self-determination, let us explore briefly what is packed under *practices* in this chapter, why it is labelled "every day" and how my interlocutors grasp resilience? As I have listed above, I use the cumulative "practices" to describe a variety of activities, with which my interlocutors engage in different roles. In this view, practices may include: management of a community centre and organization of various activities for the members of the community, but also the reciprocal participation of the "beneficiaries" becoming volunteers; organization of protests and demonstrations; carrying out humanitarian or development work; implementing cultural and educational projects; doing research; organizing forums and workshops for exchange; and the mundane "talking about my own experience". Peoples roles in these practices also vary, some are engaged professionally or due to their expert skill and knowledge, some are doing something voluntarily for people affected from the conflict and in turn some beneficiaries become actively engaged as well; while in the instances like organizing protests and demonstrations people are assuming activists-like roles. What is common, regardless of the subject, with which these practices engage (education, culture, political, entrepreneurship), the people they are targeting (women, children, displaced, diaspora) or the format of the practice, is that almost unanimously my interlocutors referred to these engagements as something that is an integral part of their daily living, even if they are not daily activities. And this perception of commonplace, ordinary practices is tightly connected to the grasp of resilience and what potential *to-be-resilient* has for Armenians. A commonly shared

grasp of resilience as a comprehensive notion is equating it to strength and the ability to overcome the hardships, to not surrender to the feeling of uncertainty and to preserve the connection to *the past*, whereas the past often materializes in lost territories and limited access to tangible heritage. Below, let us delve into some examples that illustrate in more detail such practices of resilience and discuss how they come across in the bounce back/ bounce forward axis. First, we will focus on practices of resilience aiming to mobilize horizontal resilience, and then, we will look into practices helping to strengthen one's own.

4.1 Horizontal mobilizations and activating resilience

As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, I encountered a handful of recurring verbs in almost every conversation. *To activate, to mobilize, to stimulate, to make ready, to prepare* were used synonymously to describe the need for a push for resilience and to introduce the actions in response. As one of my expert interlocutors summarized the goal of their ongoing project with displaced Artsakh-Armenians "[…] we call them community mobilizers, it is important to activate these people within the community. This way they help to increase the resilience of the community, not only their own. And you know this way it sticks because it is actions, not just words. Activating people in the community, they have the feeling of responsibility and of contributing to the community. And once they are mobilized, it becomes a long-term practice" (Hasmik*, 20.07.2022). This statement resonated with many, as if there was a consensus that collective action towards resilience must be a priority, especially in the newly emerged vulnerable communities. As was the case with the two community centres that I visited. One of them had a longer biography and specialised in providing support for women. Only after the influx of displaced people to the town, it began working more closely with women from Artsakh. While the second one was founded with the purpose to provide space for children from Artsakh and their families, and for local children whose fathers participated in the war. In my first informal conversation with the founder of the place and subsequently when I got a chance to meet with a couple of parents, all emphasised how the place is a doorway to resilience for their children and by extension to the parents. They foster this resilience through the variety of daily activities offered in the centre, from art and crafts classes to language workshops and trips. For my interlocutors, this bears twofold benefits for the children. First, it helps them increase their

short-term resilience, i.e. coping with trauma and loss and navigating the integration process into the new community. One of the mothers shared that when they relocated, her daughter struggled immensely in the new school. Although the other students, teachers and the administrative staff were very welcoming, Satenik* had to accompany her daughter to school for over 3 months. She reflects that thanks to the centre, slowly but surely her daughter began returning "to being herself again" (Satenik*, 27.07.2022). Seeing how the centre helped alleviate their children's struggles, affected the parents as well. They also share that they deeply love the place and do whatever they can to contribute: volunteer, organize events, help with the maintenance of the place. Simultaneously, the same way the centre provides a safe space for the children away from the topic of war, it gives parents some "grown-up" space to process how the war has impacted them without self-censoring. Secondly, the activities in the centre are seen as a "long-term investment into our children's resilience" (Lusine*, 27.07.2022). Here, resilience is understood as gaining new skills and helping towards finding creativity or developing a professional interest. What the children do for fun now is seen as a possible avenue to get vocational training, which is perceived as concrete steps to secure in some way their financial independence in the future. This tangent of thought of practices as capacity building for future economic resilience, affected the parents in the present, allowing them to reconsider their own professional insecurity following the relocation. A former teacher, who regularly volunteers in the centre but cannot find a teaching position, elaborated: "seeing how my child got excited to learn a new thing, I could also start looking into options for myself. Also, without feeling guilty that I'm not there for her. I am taking a baking course now, and they will give me a diploma. I remembered that I always have loved baking. […] The centre is future for my children, but also a new profession for me." (Satenik*, 01.09.2022). The insight into the daily operation of the centre shows that the practice towards resilience there is unceasing. But ultimately, it also has a much wider scope than initially anticipated. The centre mobilizes a network of receivers to give back, and some members share it was a chance to "tap into their inner resilience again" (Fieldnotes, 07.09.2022), which is strong but was temporarily concealed by the tragedy of the war.

In this light, it is interesting how resilience is simultaneously considered as one of the core features of the "Artsakh-spirit" (Narine*, 14.09.2022), yet the war had exposed new necessities to develop it further. Some of these necessities notably derive from the variety of new social constellations, which appeared after the ceasefire agreement. The war was a catalyst that

caused not only mass displacement from Nagorno-Karabakh, but galvanized a fresh surge of engagement with the Artsakh issue from the Diaspora-Armenians abroad. There were many examples of people coming together to brainstorm different ways how they can give their share to the collective effort of strengthening Armenia and Artsakh, and supporting the people in the face of the new, challenging reality. My observation is that these engagements varied from volunteering, to organizing projects or introducing a new social enterprise model to the Armenian market. In August, I received an opportunity to attend a forum that aims at connecting people, who are involved in such initiatives. The forum "Armenians Forward Together" was organized from and for Armenians from Armenia, Artsakh and abroad as a platform to discuss ideas and opportunities for engagement and collaboration between existing projects. The majority of the organizers were Diaspora-Armenians, and at first sight so were the majority of the attendees and presenters. The projects presented were mainly in the area of education and technological innovations. And it was very palpable that many of the presenters cherished the opportunity to do something with social impact directed to strengthening the broader Armenian community, while also allowing them to combine it with their professional expertise. I scribbled in my notes phrases overheard during the coffee breaks "ever since we started doing this I feel less restless/ all these efforts may seem fragmented, but I believe they make us stronger/ our goal is to help them be more resilient in the face of a future threat, but in the process I become more resilient too" – and these fragments echoed the sentiments I have encountered elsewhere. It reinforced my perception of these practices as an attempt to achieve a wide, horizontal mobilization towards resilience. In this context, resilience was marketed as a needed quality to move *forward*, a word that is also noticeably present in the title of the forum. And moving forward was understood as possible only if it resulted in collective efforts. In the side-line of the forum, I took part in a workshop dedicated specifically to Artsakh, in which a panel of experts discussed the paths of post-war recovery and development. Contrary to the somewhat optimistic vision of joining forces outlined during the day of project presentations, the workshop was very different in tone. The main reason for that was that the approach of creating a resilient Artsakh as a de facto state and to support a more resilient Artsakh population was rather in line with the bouncing back interpretation of resilience. First, because the facilitator was proposing the idea to build stronger connections between individual and private efforts with the work done by Armenian and Artsakh authorities, whose vision of strong, and hence resilient, Artsakh leaned

more towards the pre-war stability. This again echoed the idea of stronger together, however more in the direction that scattered efforts will give a deceiving sense of overcoming the conflict, while it will remain unresolved. Second, the discussants did not suggest restoring the pre-war reality, but they dabbled into the idea of framing post-war recovery and development into the pre-war mindset that was not so much burdened by the uncertainty. It was surprising to see two such contrasting approaches (from the forum and the workshop) to theorizing and implementation of practices of resilience to exist under the umbrella of the same event and to reinforce each other. The general impression from this event was that these versatile efforts to rediscover resilience, to strengthen it, to flagship it in the context of the forum as a sort of *collective branding* come into existence as a response to the feeling of uncertainty. Certainly, this event differed greatly from most of the other encounters and exchanges I had in the field. For the reason that it allowed me to observe a different format of coping with uncertainty through striving for resilience. Although, at this point, I believe it is suitable to propose that they are the two sides of the same coin. While individual or communal efforts like in the example with children's centre present us a more of grassroots or do-it-yourself approach towards mobilization for resilience, and on the opposite side are institutional activities and projects carried out by development organizations with foreign and governmental funds are a manifestation of a very structured, top-down, professionalized and institutionalized interventions, then the examples introduced at the forum, mainly, and to a lesser extent the avenues for collaboration discussed during the workshop, showcase a middle ground. These projects also come from a grassroots conscience so to speak, but they are underlined by a different set of resources being affiliated with members of the diaspora. The ideation and implementation of these practices rely on a much more substantial cultural, social and symbolic capital, and through that also has more opportunities to access further financial support. And while the forum gave a pretty clear glimpse into the anticipated outcomes of resilience and empowerment, it shed little light into the inflow of personal motivations and drivers other than the connection to a common Armenian heritage and the abstract idea of overcoming uncertainty. Luckily, I met two persons who were very open to meet with me outside the forum setting and to tell me a little bit more about their involvement in *resilience practices* and how they interpret these efforts for the communities they are intended, but also for themselves. Both Sona* and Van live abroad and became engaged in their respective projects after the 2020 war, and even though we met in person at the forum, we had to schedule

our interviews online, as they left Armenia soon after. Their inputs are particularly interesting as they are both members of the diaspora, but nonetheless bring in different perspectives.

Van is a musician, who was born and grew up in Canada, and our conversation suggests that he is a descendant of genocide survivors. He began his story about his Armenian heritage by telling me that ever since he can remember, it was a priority for his family to maintain and promote their relationship to Armenia and their Armenian identity. This was a core motivation for his father and later for Van himself. Thus, personally and through the foundation he founded, he has been supporting different educational, cultural and development initiatives throughout Armenia long before the war. The reason his activities caught my attention was the music education project that he realized in the summer of 2022 in Stepanakert. The goal of the Zartonk[7] academy, which brought together young musicians from Armenia and Artsakh, was "to give resilience and empowerment to children and their immediate families, to show that people care about them, and people are here for them, because often they feel left out and ignored, especially during the war… and to build a community, through community comes strength and empowerment" (Van, 29.08.2022). It was central to pass on the message that although the activities are for children, they are intended to have a positive effect on the entire community: "for the families – whatever good happens to your child, maybe double happens to the parents" (ibid.). My impression is that he is driven to provide opportunities for young children, especially those from Artsakh, to embrace and realize their connection to the land, history, and identity through music and culture, the same way he does. When Van defined resilience in his narratives, he talked about two types. *Previous resilience* stems from the collective experience of surviving the genocide, and nowadays continues to be especially strong in Artsakh, where it is embodied in "Artsakhtsis stubbornness to survive". He recalls that signs of this resilience seeps through in the everyday life. For example, how the walls of a music hall in Martuni are covered by bullet marks from the war and people do not intend to remove them; or how Stepanakert was not the "impossible place to go to and to be" that he expected but a lively and welcoming city, where the people have "this strength to keep on living, despite all" (ibid.). Previous resilience is differentiated from *future resilience,* which is understood as pride and preservation of culture, music, and heritage and the connection to Artsakh. He perceives this latter resilience as neglected

[7] It was very important for him to convey that *Zartonk* means *awakening*, "to awaken both the people of Artsakh, but also Armenians" (Van, 29.08.2022).

and that is why he prioritises it in his projects as a matter in urgent need of more consolidated efforts.

Similarly, Sona* also spoke about plural resiliencies. On the one hand, the resilience to survive that is so persistent in Armenians, but on the other the recent necessity to invest in the joint resilience of the wider Armenian community. Unlike Van, however, Sona* is from the generation that migrated from Armenia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and she spent her formative years in an Armenia in transition. She works in the field of education and the project she supports is also one of the many, although in her words not enough, initiatives to provide better education for children from Armenia and Artsakh. She conveys that the main priority in her work is to help children from Armenia and diaspora to connect in meaningful ways. Furthermore, she tells that in her experience she had come across many people from Armenia, Artsakh, and Diaspora who have never met someone from the other group, and that this disconnection is particularly worrying about the younger generations:

> […] of course all of us face different challenges and live in completely different contexts sometimes unimaginable for the other, in order for us to strengthen our motherland, and to really support the younger generations that are currently in schools and colleges, we really need to create that bridge with people of the same age in diaspora […] (Sona*, 23.08.2022)

It was interesting how she reflected on the importance of her work and the need to establish and nurture such relationships against her personal experience of coping and overcoming the generational trauma in her family. She shed light on how the aspect of new trauma layering over old unprocessed one is currently missing in the debates of what to do to boost resilience. She is vocal that it is essential to address the issue of trauma, if these practices aim at sustainable and effective resilience to help Armenians bounce forward. Moreover, Sona* shared that her life abroad and relationships with Armenians from abroad played a major role in her path to learn how to heal from own generational trauma. And that is why she believes this to be such a powerful prospect for the young generations now. These intertwining reflections on how the horizontal mobilization towards resilience also communicates with personal previous or present efforts to sustain the individual resilience present another element of the everyday practices that build and enforce cross-scale resilience.

4.2 Preserving your own resilience

In the examples above, we see how the horizontal mobilization of communities bears as well a direct impact on the individual experience of resilience. Also, that the drivers behind the practices are hard to separate from the personal experience. Of course, when a practice aims at strengthening the community as a whole, individual members process the support simultaneously with regard to their own needs. In a nutshell, we can assert that each practice of resilience operates on two planes, communal and individual, but nonetheless horizontal. Some interlocutors described the course of themselves becoming or feeling more resilient as a by-product of their engagement from being part of the community. However, I also encountered people who consciously or not entirely knowingly put an emphasis on how their engagement benefits them to preserve their own resilience in parallel or outside the communal efforts. In the instances where we discussed the effects of practices on the levels of personal resilience, it was much harder to estimate if resilience is understood as bouncing back or bouncing forward. In hindsight deriving from narratives of individual experiences, I would speculate that the directionality towards stability matters less, whereas the stability of being able to handle and cope with uncertainty takes the upper hand. In my fieldwork, I had two particular encounters in which reflections on the shared resilience were communicated through the process of learning to know and preserving one's own resilience.

When I spoke to Hayk, who had worked on the conflict for his research, we touched upon his recent personal experiences, also taking into account the influence of his scholarship, and this exchange turned out to be a very thought-provoking one. His reflection illuminated many aspects of the convoluted and multidirectional information flow surrounding the conflict and how it influences people's grasp of what is going on. While he acknowledged the uncertainty of the present and its immense formative capacity, and in his insights there was also profound engagement with experience of resilience and vulnerability, which from his perspective seems to be particularly appreciated as important in retrospect. One such instance is Hayk's observations from when we returned to speak about the motivations of leading to and the rewards coming out of his research: "I think I find the peace, I find my own internal peace in doing research about the conflict, not that it will change something." (Hayk, 11.09.2022). Although his work certainly adds to the epistemology of the conflict, it is also restorative for the individual to engage with

this intellectual reflection. In some ways trying to find peace with the uncertainty and unpredictability of the conflict, which I would argue is very different from defeatism or apathy, resembles sustaining one's own resilience. Hence, we can colour this perception of *peace* as acceptance of one's own capacity to offset the complexity of the conflict. Another interesting element in Hayk's case are also his reflections on the present. While mostly we have covered purposeful actions, he was the only person to ponder over purposeful inaction:

> I have, knowingly, actively refused to read news for a year. It's already been a year. So, I don't have a very close, close outlook on what has been going on. But of course the information waves are everywhere, so you get pieces, segments of news that just get to you" (ibid.).

Such a statement could easily raise many eyebrows and be considered a sign of apathy, which has the potential to disrupt connections to Artsakh and therefore is recognised to be subversive for resilience. What I read in these words, however, is not disengagement, rather directing one's capacity towards a different objective, raising one's resilience by abstaining from something (here the news flow) that can be harmful. At the same time, Hayk presented an acute awareness that he exists, interacts with people and reflects on the situation without having the full factual picture, but working out from snippets of information. When we met and at least in the frame of our conversation, he was sharing his interpretation from an introspective point of view. He grasps resilience as bravery to engage in reflection on the past experiences, the trauma, and hardships of conflict and to explore Armenia's doing. "Self-knowledge, self-reflection, to face yourself in this conflict — all of this requires a lot of bravery" (ibid.), the aspect of societal reflection is the missing element to achieve a new resilience, to bounce forward collectively from the status quo that perpetuates the conflict. And hence the resilience rests on first and foremost building up the bravery to face yourself and the individual and collective actions, thoughts, and sentiments that have been guiding in the conflict.

This experience is in a way a very secluded one from the buzzing climate of collective practices. But in the cases in which one is involved in a project to help others, there are glimpses into how these activities help to sustain or work out one's own relationship to resilience. When Sose was telling me about the resilience she has witnessed, again implying the dichotomy of inherent resilience and urgent demand for new resilience, she contemplated how this affected

herself. Sose is a Diaspora-Armenian, who at the time of our meeting was concluding a long volunteering activity, throughout which she also worked with children from Artsakh, with whom she volunteered as an art teacher. She had previously volunteered, short after the ceasefire agreement, when she worked with displaced children in one of the communities with temporary shelters. As a result of this, she is quite experienced and had seen first hand the response and the needs in different periods since 2020, as well as how the practices towards resilience changed. When we discussed resilience, Sose commenced from a reminiscence of how she encountered the resilience of the children she worked with:

> My observation is: don't look at them with one eye, they are much more resilient. You know people think 'oh, they are kids'… we should, I mean of course we should try and shelter them from the evils of the world, but I mean, they have gone through quite a lot, and I'm stunned. They are more resilient than adults. (Sose, 02.09.2022)

Details like how the children quickly switched to calling the temporary shelter home or kept talking of Artsakh in present tense, while some adults already preferred using past tense, for Sose were indicators for their resilience despite the circumstances. Having access to witness these experiences through her engagement as a volunteer introduced her a new vantage point to reassess her knowledge of Armenian resilience from a new perspective:

> I've always said we are very a resilient people. And like its funny how, when people do kenatses [toasts] at dinner and stuff, I always say this one thing, it's my favorite thing to say and I say, you know, like: Armenians, we have been through a lot, and we will like unfortunately we will always have a very tragic history, that is sort of repeating itself, but if I had to choose, and you know being reborn and all that stuff was possible, I would always choose this, I wouldn't wanna be anything else. I always new we are resilient but seeing it through this children's perspective… I always knew we were resilient but until I saw it more with my own eyes, I was like, I mean, we really are. (ibid.)

For anyone, but especially for members of the diaspora, it seems that engaging with these practices and having an opportunity to communicate in person with the people directly affected by the conflict can be very cathartic. This allows to reevaluate your own definitions of notions such as resilience, suffering, trauma and many others that typically occur in a conflict context. While starting from a point of empathy, there are multiple distances which determine the extent to which one person is affected. And empathy is not always a sufficient starting point for

unravelling complexity. The practices introduced here help narrow the distance between these differently positioned individuals and groups and calibrate the comprehension of the conflict and its aftermath beyond the mediated narratives. As we can see, these practices of resilience help develop personal mechanisms to endure and make sense of uncertainty, they help communities to find stability and strength and ultimately are the current expression of how Armenians are internally facilitating the process of self-determination.

Interlude. New borders/ new clashes

As if to prove that uncertainty is not simply a perception, turned into an abstract analytical paradigm, but has concrete material impacts, the period of my fieldwork – from late June to the end of September – was full of significant developments and changes, showing once again that the ceasefire is not a guarantee for stability. These events, illustrating the fluid and erratic boundaries and borderlines of the conflict, weaved in one more layer of uncertainty into my findings. On the one hand, my physical presence in Armenia allowed me to live through these developments first-hand. Although I was distantly observing how, what was going on in the peacekeeper's zone and at the border of Armenia, made itself felt in the everyday life in Yerevan, the opportunity to witness these developments not only as virtually mediated narratives co-created by social media users' reactions to the current events, provided me with new grasps of how the uncertainty is reflected in the day-to-day. On the other hand, these developments unavoidably came into light in the exchange with my interlocutors and continuously moulded their reflexive perspectives. As a result of the escalations, the insights disclosed with me were made out of a twofold awareness. Inasmuch as we were deliberating on the overall situation from the past two years and my research partners' experiences from this period in retrospect, what they shared was always associated with the ongoing events.

Since mid-June the people living in the areas of the newly drawn borders of Artsakh, particularly in the town of Berdzor and the villages of Aghavno and Sus, were confronted with a new set of challenges. As stipulated in the November 9 agreement, by 2023 Armenia must, in accordance with a jointly outlined plan for construction, build a new alternative route to the Lachin corridor that will provide a connection between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Control over the Lachin district was previously ceded to Azerbaijan in December 2020, apart from the five-kilometre buffer zone around the corridor. This strip of *no man's land* was under the jurisdiction of the Russian peacekeeping contingent. Nevertheless, there were some settlements still populated by Armenians. In Aghavno as an example, a large number of the pre-war population, some of whom fled during the war, returned to their homes after the ceasefire agreement, even though as per the agreement sooner or later (once when the new road is finished, at the latest by 2023) they will have to leave. Their decision to stay was a form of defiance to the concession made by the officials to cede these territories, which was widely

understood not only as betrayal, but also as abandoning those people who still live there. Refusing to leave and staying in their homes, tending the agricultural lands and not leaving "until the very last minute" (Shahverdyan, 2022) was a sign of self-determination. After the disappointment in the authorities, the only one left to trust and rely on was one's own community. In June and July, both Armenia and Artsakh officials began warning the population of these settlements that handover and relocation will have to take place in the very near future. Reports about breaking the ceasefire on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh are nothing out of the ordinary. On the 3rd and 4th of August, however, one of the most intense escalations seen since the 2020 war took place in the vicinity of the Lachin corridor. Artsakh Defence Army reported 2 killed and 19 injured servicemen and in their daily report, the Russian peacekeepers accused Azeri armed forces for breaking the ceasefire. The Azeri side announced that they have conducted a retaliatory operation in response to alleged ceasefire violations by Armenians, and demanded that full control over the Lachin corridor will be handed to them at the earliest.

Following the clashes, the Artsakh's authorities' reaction was to command the immediate evacuation of the people from the above-mentioned Berdzor, Aghavno and Sus. The residents were given 20 days to *organise* the evacuation from their homes. Because of the intensity of the events leading to the handover of the settlements and the unpredictability of the borderline tensions, this couldn't be described as anything else but evacuation, yet there was some time to make arrangements. A couple of weeks later, I came across a short documentary titled *Evacuation again*, which was showing the process of departure and farewell through the eyes of the children in Aghavno (Mkrtchian, 2022). The name "Evacuation again" was dismally fitting, considering that these people have had to evacuate from their homes before. Last time they were able to return, this time the hope to return was more imaginary than realistic. It is likely that, depending on where they will relocate next, they will have to evacuate again, if the ceasefire escalates beyond the point of no return. This mid-August evacuation seemed less urgent, although the clock was silently counting down in the background. The news were showing families loading their households on trucks. Whatever they could not load, they burned. Footage of people watching how their homes burn to the ground. House-burning was nothing new, during the handovers in the weeks right after the war many Artsakh-Armenians set their homes on fire. Burning them down is an attempt to evacuate what cannot be evacuated. By the 25th of August

the residents of Berdzor, Aghavno and Sus have left. On the 25th of August, Lachin, Zabukh and Sus were vacant for whoever comes next.

While reports about breaking the ceasefire on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh are nothing out of the ordinary, reports about clashes on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan were not *supposed to be* that commonplace. The September attack was significant because it proved the popular perception that Nagorno-Karabakh is not the only frontline, and that sooner or later Azerbaijan will start realising its appetites towards Armenian territories. The reactions towards this event were ambiguous, wavering between anxiety from the possibility of a new war to sombre acceptance that future large-scale hostilities are unavoidable. For many, the Armenian-Azerbaijan border already represented a physical contour of uncertainty – will the fighting come closer, when will the conflict extend to here? The September attack mitigated some of these uncertainties by cementing the presence of a new frontline. This was the biggest escalation since the war despite that it barely lasted 48 hours – Azerbaijan shelled more than 20 localities along the border in three provinces Syunik, Ghegharkunik and Vayots Dzor. The Armenian side alone reported 207 fallen or missing servicemen, more than 200 wounded, and at least 20 confirmed prisoners of war. Azeri forces announced that 80 soldiers were killed in action. The clashes were significant not only because of the high death toll and the magnitude of their destruction, this time the hostilities had nothing to do with the Nagorno-Karabakh line of contact, they took place entirely on the internationally recognized border of Armenia.

Following the news from the morning of September 13, despite the anxiety, it felt as if something had clicked on a societal level. Something fell into place despite the possibility of impending chaos, and at first I couldn't really grasp what it was. The fact that some bitter predictions became reality, even with all the terror they bring along, also alleviated some of the uncertainties. The ghastly expectation of Azerbaijan launching an attack towards Armenian borders was no longer balancing on the edge of uncertain questions and speculations.

Uncertainty was unravelling and entangling anew before my eyes.

(5) SELF-DETERMINATION AS A PROCESS OF IDENTITY NEGOTIATION

Thus far, the thesis has covered three central dimensions that demarcate the space for the discussion of the findings of this research. These are: the theoretical legacy of the notion of self-determination; the specific temporality of uncertainty, heightened following the ceasefire in 2020, and how people relate their experiences of it; and, lastly, the myriad of practices of resilience that emerged in response to the developments of the conflict. Before we venture to break down in more detail how these aspects are linked to each other, communicate with the research question, and impact the process of collective self-determination for (Artsakh-)Armenians, there is one more theoretical pillar to consider.

As already mentioned, it is hard to speak of a monolith Armenian identity, which also transpires in the wide variety of representation that my interlocutors bring to the table. While there are many commonalities, these different versions of Armenian identity are shaped by profoundly different transgenerational trajectories, which in the present create an abundance of biographies and experiences of *being* Armenian. Nonetheless, this abundance is equally drawn to the main aspects that constitute what is imagined to be the groundwork of the shared national identity (B. Anderson, 2006): the Armenian language, religion and history, culture, and inevitably the current geopolitical developments. Notably, regardless of their background, people are very determined to make sense how the reciprocity between this core and their individual experiences affect them personally, as well as their family trees, with one of the most significant and dear shared sentiments and thinking focus being the issue of Artsakh. For my interlocutors, the questions of what is the importance of Artsakh and what is their role in the process of Artsakh's struggle for self-determination, often times occurred as an undertone in their stories, even if not explicitly put into words. Usually, when we think of (national) self-determination of peoples, the meddling of external actors can completely shift how the outcome is perceived and if it is at all recognised as legitimate. To exemplify that, let's think for instance about the commonly heralded as positive examples Kosovo and East Timor versus Crimea. In these cases, however, we speak of meddling of recognised international actors. While in the case of Artsakh, and particularly in the context of my research, we encounter a wider network of people, who are engaged in Artsakh's struggle for self-determination from the inside and from the outside, but notably from the position of being Armenian.

The shared affection of the importance of Artsakh is expressed with phrases such as "Artsakh is the heart of Armenia", "if you look in the history, even when the rest of Armenia was struggling under Ottoman and Persian rule, Artsakh preserved our heritage", or "Artsakh is sacred for Armenians". Different iterations of these statements popped up in interviews, in informal conversations whenever it became clear that I have interest in Artsakh and what are people's relations to it beyond the frame of the conflict. While it is easy to brush away these statements as nationalistic sentiments, my encounters in the field indicate otherwise. Surely there are individuals and factions in the society, some of which are politically motivated, who exhibit nationalistic tendencies and the Artsakh cause can be easily instrumentalised for such purposes. The majority of these statements as I have encountered them, however, stem from the need to underline the bonds to Artsakh as an integral part of Armenian identity, which can be equally strong for someone who grew up in rural Artsakh, for a person born and raised in Yerevan, or for a young 4th generation member of Armenian-Diaspora, who is eagerly starting to learn Armenian. It should be made clear that the claim for self-determination, even if at moments politically supported by Armenia, or the suspected ties of members Artsakh's de facto leadership to Russia, remains on Artsakh's people's shoulders, as they are and will be not at all figuratively speaking the point of impact in the case of new military escalations. Yet, Armenians in Armenia and those from the diaspora are deeply involved in this process, despite that their lives are not as directly and tangibly affected by the developments on the ground, and that they are not in the position to claim self-determination for Artsakh.

The reflections on the variety of different bonds and pathways to relate to Artsakh (through history, through family roots, through self discovery) unearth an important element of the role of Artsakh in the course of sense making of the collective identity and individual positionality towards this identity. And this characteristic, in my opinion, performs a twofold function. On the one hand, the continuous reflection on the meaning of Artsakh opens space to gauge insider's expectations against the dynamics of self-determination. Not only in terms of historical and cultural legacy or as a cause that glues together the wide Armenian society, but more broadly: from the throbbing and harrowing point of view of having to constantly reevaluate the ongoing, unresolved conflict that at any given moment can require new political and social, public as well as personal concessions. The previously discussed accounts on how uncertainty is tackled or how to effectively join efforts and agency to strengthen the many-sided resilience shed

light on a certain tacit understanding that for my interlocutors the question of self-determination is in motion, it is not a static claim set in stone. On the other hand, but not contradictory as much as complementary, the continuous reflection on the meaning of Artsakh also in relation to the process of self-determination highlights the different advances towards better understanding one's own *Armenian-ness* and negotiating its place within the pool of Armenian identity(-ies), bearing in mind their multitude. These deliberations altogether brought me to consider the unfolding of a process of identity negotiation in the context of the conflict, in which the different actors arrange and work out their varying Armenian identities in relation to each other.

Clearly, the matter of identity is central to the subject of this research and has been raised repeatedly. At the same instant, it has been a conscious intention to include the question of identity sparingly, and not to make it the primary prism of exploring self-determination. That is so because the shared and recognized collective identity is seen as the main vehicle to broadcast the claims and demands for the right to self-determination. Yet here I have been trying to trace not the genesis of the struggle for self-determination of Artsakh but how it has been carried forward, especially in light of the different turbulences. I came to the conclusion that in the context of this research, the analysis should interact with identity similarly to how it engages with the notion of self-determination. That is to say, to apply to identity the guiding approach of this thesis — to challenge our perception of it as a definite notion towards engaging with it as a concept, which continuously unfolds in practice as a process. On that account, not the collective identity per se, but rather the process of how Armenian identity in its multitude is being produced and reproduced materialized as a potent course to exploration that allows to unveil the different meanings of self-determination for the different actors. The Armenian identity and the meaning of Artsakh for these different iterations of the collective identity are changing in the light of the conflict and this change, be it deliberate or automatic, is what I want to highlight as a process of identity negotiation in this chapter.

Behind the concept of identity negotiation, there is a rich theory that merges influences from different fields of study. For the research, I struggled to find a theoretical mainstay that provides enough substance to apply the complexity of identity negotiation to the researched context without diverting too much attention to the wide and composite matter of (national) identity. For this purpose, Stella Ting-Toomey's comprehensive identity negotiation theory proved to be a useful source of insights. The main objective behind this theoretical framework is

to apply identity negotiation theory in practice in the areas of intercultural communication and (interpersonal and intergroup) conflict mediation. Ting-Toomey has been developing the identity negotiation perspective for over three decades, constantly updating and revisiting this analytical angle to correspond to the contemporary research findings. Here my point of reference is one of the more recent distillations of her work. In the core of this theoretical approach is the understanding that individual identities are a complex multifaceted amalgamation of ethnic, cultural, religious or spiritual, gender, social class, age, sexual orientation memberships and belongings alongside the varying professional and personal relational roles, which are based on the personal self-perception of the individuals, but are also mutually constructed within the social group (Ting-Toomey, 2017). Against this backdrop, Ting-Toomey considers the reciprocal relationship between these individual perceptions and the pulling and pushing forces of the different sociocultural memberships we hold, which coming together shape our identity:

> Thus, each individual's composite identity has group membership, relational role, and individual self-reflexive implications. Individuals mostly acquired their composite identity through socio-cultural conditioning process, individual lived experiences, and the repeated intergroup and interpersonal interaction experiences. The term negotiation in the INT [identity negotiation theory] refers to the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages between the two or more communicators in maintaining, threatening, or uplifting the various socio-cultural group-based or unique personal-based identity images of the other *in situ*. (Ting-Toomey, 2015: 418)

Ting-Toomey proceeds to note that in "collectivistic group-oriented cultural communities", the issues deriving from the collective social-based identity get the upper hand on issues on concerns of the individuated-based identity (ibid.). Moreover, one of the core assumptions of identity negotiation theory proposes that a successful process of identity negotiation, i.e. one that is satisfactory for all sides who participate in it, culminates in a mutual feeling of understanding and respect and awareness of the mutuality (Ting-Toomey, 2017). Researchers who have used the identity negotiation theory predominantly work in migrant or intercultural contexts, meaning that they study identity negotiation in a culturally heterogenous setups, which foster specific intergroup-interpersonal dynamics.

In the case of Armenia and Artsakh, we can speak of a much stronger homogeneity in the perception of the sociocultural membership, so as per my observation the identity negotiation is directed more to the question of how to accommodate the differences stemming from different

life-trajectories underlying the individual identities in the shared group-based experience, in particular with focus on Artsakh. The individual experience of and the proximity to Artsakh becomes a lens for interpretation of how the group-based identity is maintained. The interpretation of the dynamic personal-group identity is, much like all other aspects of daily life after the war in 2020, strongly influenced by the feeling of uncertainty. While the practices of resilience as depicted previously can as well be explored as a practice of identity negotiation, especially if we account for the commonly shared comment about resilience being inherent in Armenian identity overall. I propose to delve into identity negotiation through the ways in which my interlocutors speak of themselves in relation to the other two represented groups of Armenians, and how the intergroup relations are perceived. With attention to the nuances of the different personal experiences and backstories, the following paragraphs will also discuss how thoughts about uncertainty and practices of resilience converge into the negotiation of different Armenian identities. Lastly, here we will also look at these manifestations of identity negotiation as a present expression of the process of self-determination.

4.1 For Artsakh-Armenians

The Artsakh-Armenians, who I have interviewed, predominantly gravitate towards reflecting on their relations with Armenians from Armenia. This leaning is understandable, as their lives are if not entirely, then to a large extent relocated to Armenia. Daily routines, work, school and encounters with neighbours put to test day after day how Artsakh-Armenians and Armenians from Armenia navigate the different aspects of identity that represent closeness and remoteness to each other. We are not speaking of testing how they are or will be getting along, but more in the sense of testing how they will cognize each other as sometimes complementing, sometimes conflicting parts of a whole.

One of the leitmotifs in the deliberation on this relationship is encountering Armenians' positive image of Artsakh and its people, together with their rather negative expectations of what life in Artsakh is like. On the one hand, it is common for Armenians to romanticize Artsakh, a proneness which is also evident in the above-mentioned accounts, e.g. "Artsakh is the heart of Armenia". This goes along with feelings of powerful awe to Artsakh's nature and admiration to the character and determination of Artsakh's population. On the other hand, there are many

Armenians who don't have first-hand experience of the life in Artsakh, and thus whose first associations are of dire living conditions in a conflict-stricken environment. These two images are not antagonistic, and often occupy simultaneously the perception of Artsakh. My interlocutors from Artsakh note that at first they didn't clash with this twofold image. Due to the fact that most of them had family and friends in Armenia and anyway, the severity of the war did not leave any space for exploration of these themes. However, with time passing, they admit that more frequently they have to acknowledge and navigate such expectations about themselves and about Artsakh. Kristine puts this experience in words in a way that epitomizes well how the others also encounter this in their daily life:

> We prioritize it [the war] more than them [Armenians from Armenian], but I can't say they don't think about it. They have lost people, they have lost friends. They are speaking about it too and remember it. And we actually, I have discussed it, we talk about the war period with my friends, my new friends here. And until now, all of them are worried about the current the situation, they are asking me about how is it going, how everything is going in Artsakh, how is the road—recently we had some problems with the road to Armenia, now we have a new road, so… They ask me how people live there. And also one thing that I noticed when you say that you are from Artsakh and you, even like you came to Yerevan for studying they are like how you live there? I don't know, they think that is hard to live there, but I mean if you love, if love your landscape it doesn't matter in what situation it is, it doesn't matter… You get used to the bad conditions, you get used to. People from Yerevan call it fear, but we don't have fear, we are not scared to live there. (Krisitne, 12.09.2022)

It is common on the side of my Artsakh-interlocutors to refute the expectation that life in Artsakh is dire and impossible if not for Artsakhsti's extraordinary stubbornness and will to live in their homeland. They conduct the reality of living in a disputed territory and an unrecognized country by emphasising on the conscious choice to live in Artsakh. Even those, who have decided not to return after the ceasefire agreement, are eager to convey that people live there and return not in an act of a courageous sacrifice, that living in Artsakh is not a "performance" of enduring hardships in the name of *the* cause, but a choice that embodies the collective pursuit for self-determination.

While these assumptions about the life in Artsakh trigger responses of objection, when it comes to images about their fellow Artsakh-Armenians, it seems that to an extent they cherish the romanticized representation of their compatriots. It is hard to assess precisely the extent to

which my interlocutors sympathize with this image, also because it is important to acknowledge the prominence of feeling homesick. An emotion that is further exacerbated by the uncertainty of another escalation — are they homesick for Artsakh altogether, for their homes that were located in the lost territories, or homesick for the future due to the possibility of losing more of Artsakh in case of a new escalation? In any case the physical distance, alongside the idea of the brave and resilient Artsakhtsi coalesce to result in a stronger appreciation of the Artsakh-identity. What it means to *belong from* Artsakh is verbalized through memories and the stories told to other people. These memories and stories come out with a particularly strong emphasis on Artsakh-ness when they are told to their children, or when a group of Artsakh-Armenians talk to a *trusted other*, who has not yet been to Artsakh. The memories which surfaced in our conversations were recurrently about the day before the war and the morning the war started — these memories turned into stories encompassing places, experiences, and reactions that for my interlocutors appear to be in the essence of Artsakh-identity.

However, it is not only the difficulty of having to navigate to a degree the idealized expectations towards themselves, nor the heightened appreciation of their Artsakh-heritage that guides the reflection on their relations with other Armenians. Another focus of attention are the common challenges that Armenians as a whole face. My interview partners stress that for them, in the past 30 years uncertainty has been more tangible than to those living in Armenia, but the war from 2020 had profoundly changed how things stand. Now they are aware that what they have experienced is more widely spread. Some view this recent uncertainty en masse as an opportunity to understand each other better, including to understand better what it means to cultivate everyday resilience. This so to speak positive understanding of the uncertainty conceives it as a bridge between what has been perceived as experiential differences between Armenians from Artsakh and Armenia. For others, the war and the direct security threat to Armenia are a "wake-up call" to recognize that a threat to Artsakh is a threat to all Armenians. My interlocutor Lilith* voiced particularly strong opinions in this direction. Her remarks — that it is time to stop thinking of "ourselves [Armenians] as separate entities" and that "it is not normal to accept the constant threat to our security as commonplace, it affects all of us, not just people in Artsakh or those in the border regions" (Lilith*, 13.09.2022) — summarize well an attitude towards uncertainty that understands it as a catalyst towards collective action, and not as the dominant negative conditions that frames the current mode of life.

Similarly, when it comes to the reflections on what are the impacts of the practices of resilience within the Artsakh communities in Armenia, my research partners tend to go both ways. On a positive note, they observe a strengthening effect to embrace more fully this shared Armenian-ness. These spaces are often open not only for people from Artsakh, but also for Armenians who have lost a family member during the war, or for veterans. In this sense, through these practices those who are engaged in them are able to process together and recognize each other's loss, struggles and need for resilience. On a more negative note, my interview partners allude to a not yet fully specified concern regarding how to preserve what is "uniquely Artsakh" when they have to adapt more and more to the new living reality, having to navigate long-term needs of work, financial and housing security for them and their needs.

Finally, although my interlocutors from Artsakh predominantly reflected on their emerging and developing relationships with other Armenians, there have been comments on the role of the diaspora as well. These comments were fewer, which I give to the fact that there are less daily and informal interactions. Overall, the message on the Diaspora-Armenians is one of gratitude for showing support and helping out in the difficult moment. The readiness with which the diaspora mobilized is also viewed as evidence for the strong connection between Armenians.

4.2 For Armenians from Armenia

The main observation from the conversations with my Armenian interlocutors was that unlike their Artsakh-Armenian counterparts, when it came to the topic of the different Armenian identities they tended to reflect more keenly in all directions. Moreover, it was this group of my research partners, who made most frequent and clear connections between the struggle for self-determination and the ongoing process of understanding the broader Armenian community better. They understand that the question of Artsakh's people's self-determination is on the table and their role, in what course the resolution of this question will go, is ambiguous and indirect, yet nonetheless they perceive that they are involved and exhibit readiness to show up for their part. In this sense, how they relate to the experiences of Artsakh-Armenians and Diaspora-Armenians in the context of the conflict, resembles a lot how they reflect on the respective positions and capacity to steer, individually and as a part of the collective whole, the process of self-determination.

Similar to the path of thought of Artsakh-Armenians, my Armenian research partners launched the reflection from the place of understanding and recognizing in new ways how being Armenian and being from Artsakh comes together, and how it differs from their own experiences, beliefs, and expectations. While revisiting my field notes, I recalled that none of my interlocutors spoke about having direct family connections to Artsakh, which leads me to deduce that they don't have close relatives from there. Of course, there is the possibility that they omitted this information from our conversation. However, my experience shows that people are eager to highlight whatever personal connections they have to Artsakh, e.g. "my grandmother is from Artsakh", "my aunt married and now lives there", "my brother-in-law has a family in Artsakh" (Field notes). From my perspective, this highlighting is done not only to depict oneself closer to Artsakh's identity and experience, but also to validate one's commentary and reflections that may come on the matter. Since these remarks were missing in the interviews, I assume that these "first-degree" personal relations did not substantiate the introspection and deliberation of my interlocutors. I find this is worthy to mention because the way they approached reflecting on the interpersonal and intergroup dynamics left an impression of coming from a place of bringing up and relying on first-hand experiences from knowing people from Artsakh. Meaning that whatever connections and bonds they have forged there, through work or personal visits, these have become intimate enough to provide a feeling of assurance in their reflection process and most importantly when they voice these reflections to a foreign researcher.

The main lens through which they explored how they relate to Artsakh's people, especially in the aftermath of the war, was mainly expressed through the idea of bearing collective responsibility for Artsakh and themselves feeling responsible. Yet this responsibility was not conceived in a patronizing way and was in itself understood as a complex process that requires careful actions. Tigran* and Narek voiced similar positions about the extent to which it is acceptable for Armenians to engage in the process of self-determination. They point up that they are not the ones to engage on behalf of Artsakh in claiming self-determination: "it's not me who should talk about that [self-determination], but I can be helpful to those who have the right" (Narek, 12.09.2022); "we can sit all day and talk about self-determination, I'm sure everyone has something to say about it, but it is the people who live in Artsakh who daily do something about it" (Tigran*, 09.08.2022). This position indicates that they feel Armenians are responsible to provide security, so that Karabakh-Armenians can exercise self-determination. This idea of

taking up responsibility, which sometimes is verbalized as a desire and obligation to be helpful, also heavily extends to the diaspora. One example of how such a responsibility can materialize, with attentiveness towards the fragile ceasefire, which is what mainly calls for carefully thought through actions, is raising awareness with emphasis of Artsakh's external recognition and helping to open up space for democratic action internally:

> […] we and diaspora are responsible for talking about the recognition of Artsakh to provide an armour - because recognition is an armour for Artsakh, so that the people can independently work to resolve other issues, including such related to security. (Narek, 12.09.2022)

It appears that self-determination, not only regarding the Karabakh conflict, is understood by some as a spectrum of access to (civic) freedom, democracy, legal standing and representation. I conclude this based on some remarks I have encountered along the way: "self-determination doesn't end with the state, actually I think state is the beginning of another struggle" Field notes, 21.07.2022, "there are many things which we are yet to demand as a society, but we already have the basis, that's what self-determination is for" (Field notes, 04.08.2022). In this regard, Gayane* made some interesting connection between responsibility and living alongside Artsakhtsi after the war. She strongly sympathises with the idea of responsibility, but questions how to provide it constructively and with acknowledgement of Artsakhtsi's own agency — "how to support them and how to live together when we [in Armenia] already have what people from Karabakh want?" (Gayane*, 14.09.2022). To an extent, this concern exposes how the idea of bearing responsibility flashes out the differences in what Artsakh-Armenians and Armenians have as expectations from self-determination. Gayane*'s reflections were particularly engaging, as some of her remarks echoed what I have heard from my interlocutors from Artsakh regarding the influence of uncertainty on the identity negotiation between Armenians and Artsakh-Armenians. The experience of uncertainty and the drop-by-drop intimidation coming from the Azeri military forces "every other day there are bad news, they don't let us cope with the 44-days war" (Gayane*, 14.09.2022), from this perspective are again perceived as a prospect to bring people closer. At the same time, there are concerns about the long-term dynamics to come. Another reoccurring theme is about the maintenance of balance and creating conditions for independence of those, who have decided to stay in Armenia. From the angle of responsibility, the open question is how to be responsible in a productive and empowering way. How easy is it to blur the

lines between providing support to people to pursue their cause and providing handouts? This echoes closely the discussion on how protracted humanitarian aid creates the risk of making Artsakh's people dependable, while prompting resentment in other vulnerable populations in Armenia for not receiving the same amount of support. On a personal level, however, these questions are intertwined with the question of personal and collective responsibility that needs to be adjusted to the requirements of people and Artsakh as the primarily affected entity in the current frame of the conflict.

Interestingly, responsibility is a driving force not only in the reflections on the interplay between Artsakh-Armenian and Armenian identities. My interlocutors brought up the matter of responsibility as a powerful tool for introspection. On the one hand, it is understood as responsibility to make the conflict better-known. The perception that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is if not entirely invisible to the *Outside*, then a largely misunderstood and misrepresented one, is very persistent across Armenians. In this context, responsibility emerges as both obligation and commitment to make the conflict, with its struggles and losses, visible from the outside. On the other hand, responsibility in its introspective capacity is perceived as means to offset the apathy in fellow Armenians. Being "apathetic" is presented as one of the main issues that has the potential to undermine Artsakh's struggle for self-determination from within. That is why responsibility has the function to also maintain engagement despite the uncertainty and to uplift the collective spirit. In my opinion, the question of apathy in the situation of a (frozen) conflict (and subsequently in peace-making) is yet another significant theme that requires its own in-depth research. Still, it is worth noting in brief here that alongside disappointment and anger, apathy generates a great deal of mutual understanding. And my observations lead me to think that this understanding similarly derives from the feeling of responsibility. Third, responsibility is also needed to broaden the understanding of the history and the dynamics of the conflict from within, not only on the level of personal losses. Hayk acknowledged this straightforwardly in our conversation. He reasons his accounts on this function of responsibility with his experience of collaborating with Azerbaijani scholars and activists: "every time you put the slash [between Armenian and Azeri toponyms] you realize you have been stuck. You learn to abstract yourself from your own values and try to understand that both sides have values attached" (Hayk, 11.09.2022). In a sense, there is more responsibility to

be sought and cultivated from within not to concede to a neutral or a nationalistic narrative, but to recognize the impacts of the conflict on the other side of the border.

Some testimony excerpts above already suggested that responsibility is expected from the Diaspora-Armenians as well. Although most of my interlocutors commented more sparingly on the relations to the diaspora, two things were made known. First, overall there is appreciation and positive reception of the mobilization and the support coming from the diaspora during and after the war. However, my research partners set the bar very high as to what they expect from the diaspora from now on. There are strong opinions, which demand that the Diaspora-Armenians are responsible to pressure their respective governments to, if not recognize Artsakh as a state, acknowledge the de facto state as a self-governing actor in the conflict. The underlying message is that through showing up for Artsakh, Diaspora-Armenians can assert their membership.

4.3 For Diaspora-Armenians

Bearing in mind the contexts in which I encountered and approached my interlocutors from the diaspora, it does not come as a surprise that their accounts revealing the process of identity negotiation are refined through making sense of their connection to Artsakh. Notably, their reflections were more frequently introspective and engaged primarily with unearthing their own positions and identity in the complex web of agents involved and impacted by the conflict on the Armenian side. Their accounts reveal how the physical distance shapes, by extension, their perceptions of Artsakh, and respectively how these perceptions change when gaining physical proximity and interacting with Artsakh-Armenians. In addition, an alternation between *We* (Armenians altogether) and *Them* (people from Artsakh) was most pronounced in the narratives of this group. In some instances, for example when talking about collective trauma and resilience, they relied on *We,* in other cases, most commonly when talking about the developments during the war, the narrative switched to *Them*.

On the topic of expectations clashing with reality, the contributions by the Diaspora-Armenians added a particularly interesting layer for understanding what role expectations play for the process of identity negotiation. The diaspora members in my pool of interviewees tended to speak about Artsakh-Armenians with the previously mentioned idealized image. Again portraying them as brave, stubborn, resilient, being warm, welcoming, and

hospitable despite the hardships, and it seems that their in-person meetings with Artsakhtsi only solidified this image further. In contrast, however, their imagined picture of Artsakh as a place was challenged. While they spoke of the "lush green of Artsakh", "pristine nature", "breathtaking mountains" as the essence of Artsakh, they confess that they imagined that these natural features have been obscured by the war. That is why, all my interlocutors from the diaspora repeatedly drew attention to how stunned they were when they visited Artsakh for a first time. On the one hand, similarly to how they perceive the people, the first-hand experience of Artsakh's natural heritage further solidified their sentiment of the symbolic significance of Artsakh, embodied in the natural beauty. However, what they discovered as profoundly unexpected was the presence of tranquillity, or more precisely the lack of ubiquitous presence of war. Their visits brought a revelation that the cities and villages are clean, bright, and lively, instead of clouded by the memory of the war. Whatever markings were left visible on buildings, or in districts where reconstruction work was still ongoing, these instances are viewed as a sign of resilience.

Overall, in the reflections of the Diaspora-Armenians, there was more attention on the topic of resilience rather than on how uncertainty impacts them. Armenians and Artsakh-Armenians ruminated on how the experience of uncertainty affects them similarly, for the members of the diaspora the practices of resilience are in the focus of the ongoing process of understanding each other better. They recognize the impact of uncertainty, but their personal experiences are more closely associated with the practices of resilience by being actively involved in projects and initiatives. When they discuss the large amount of initiatives supported by the diaspora and relay details of their individual action in particular, two points stand out. First, these activities are guided by a distinctive aspiration to help to strengthen Artsakh and Artsakh-Armenians, this help is communicated as "playing our part". The conversation gravitates more often around help than around responsibility, at the same time this help, too, is regarded as an obligation to the collective. Second, the participation in projects and initiatives that carry out this help in practice, be it professional or on a voluntary basis, results in better understanding Armenian-ness, and perceiving oneself as part of the collective.

The Diaspora-Armenians I spoke to are regularly personally confronted with the gratitude of Artsakh-Armenians due to their engagement in the field. Thus, they attach additional meanings to their activities in the field. "All these projects are not only to grant financial support,

they are a sign not to fear - a sign for those in Artsakh to know that the diaspora sends support. These are also acts of encouragement." (Narine*, 14.09.2022). Although this reading may not contradict, how these projects are greeted in the Artsakh communities beyond the commonly expressed gratitude, it shows how for Diaspora-Armenians, at least in the case of my interviews the reflection on the constellation of different identities is passed through the sieve of their personal contribution.

Interestingly, the members of the diaspora are even more demanding towards the Armenian diaspora as a whole to step up their support for Artsakh and Armenia. My interlocutors shared strong opinions about the need for more consolidated support coming from the diaspora, especially in the political front. Even if I have observed predominantly introspective reflections, this group is also the one who is most vocal of the necessity to build better bridges social, cultural, political and economic between Armenians from diaspora, Armenia and Artsakh.

Interlude. Unseen Artsakh

The field site is by definition a place and space for deliberate "being there" (Coleman & Collins, 2006). It is formative for the process of the research, and even if it is spatially close and familiar for the researcher, the interaction with the field requires a certain travelling, be it geographical or mental, and shifting of the locations (Clifford, 1997: 88). How else could we then practice the famous anthropological absorption necessary for thick description and interpretation of the Other (Geertz, 1973/2000), if not through going to the field and immersing ourselves?

For a variety of reasons, I had to limit my fieldwork within the borders of Armenia. On the one hand, I had to make sure that the scope of the research was feasible. On the other hand, there were the issues with security and access. The matter of access was out of my hands, after the war it became increasingly difficult for foreign citizens to obtain a visa/entrance permit for Artsakh, especially for people who have never been there before. And even if they managed to get a visa, they had to pass through roads nominally under the control of Russian peacekeeping forces. Locals who were going to Karabakh were sharing ambiguous experiences from their passage of the corridor. I've been told about the constantly changing number of checkpoints and passport controls along the way, and peacekeepers doubting the validity of the visas of people with double citizenship or foreigners. As I was preparing for the fieldwork, it seemed quite risky to bet on the slim possibility to get a chance to go to Artsakh for a couple of days, instead I opted to design a multi-sited fieldwork in and around Yerevan.

Yet, Artsakh was present in every single interaction. By all means, as the main subject and core point of reference for my interlocutors, its presence was anticipated and sought after. What surprised me at a certain point of the research, was the realisation that alongside Artsakh's presence, its absence started becoming more and more palpable. Unseen sites are not a precedent in ethnography. Usually they refer to some kind of virtual space with an underlying material infrastructure that substantiates its existence – like textual communities confined between the covers of a zine (Eichhorn, 2001) or nethnography of digital spaces and online communities (Kozinets, 2019). While a zine or a social media platform creates and mediates the space of the fieldwork, these sites remain imagined and projected in a particular shared consciousness. They

are *seen* in the sense to be experienced and dwelled into, but remain unseen simply because they don't have the physical dimensions. In a way such field sites have limited visibility, besides for the *emic* community they are also visible for the researcher, and it becomes her task to transform them from *unseen* to her readership.

The invisibility of Artsakh in the context of my research had different roots. The territorial embeddedness of Artsakh and the strive for Artsakhtsi's self-determination differentiates it from other unseen sites. Nagorno-Karabakh is territorially confined, even if this territory is in the heart of the conflict. So, at a first glance, regardless which perspective we take to grasp the history and the present dynamics of the conflict, if simply regarded as a topography of land, Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh is a visible site. The seen-unseen dichotomy started playing out more prominently only in the course of my encounters in the field. On a very personal and experiential level, some of my interlocutors have expressed that they perceive themselves and Artsakh, Artsakh's people and the complexities of the conflict as invisible to the people from the *outside*. This aspect of unseen Artsakh has been additionally exacerbated by the international response to the war in Ukraine, which seemingly only cemented further the struggles of Nagorno-Karabakh under the obscuring label of regional conflict. I've been told by many that for them, it is indicative of Artsakh's invisibility that even people who have heard of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict cannot relate it to Artsakh. These reflections on unseen Artsakh largely spur out of the question of who is to blame for that? And the responses that transpire are very convoluted. On the one hand, there is a strong sentiment of Armenia and Artsakh being abandoned to deal with this conflict on their own or with undesirable and untrustworthy allies. But on the other hand, in light of the 2020 war, everyone I spoke to is very introspective about this, asking themselves how *we are ourselves* to blame and what must be done next. Secondly, as I alluded earlier, I gradually started confronting Artsakh's absence in the fieldwork and for myself more acutely the more I spoke to my interlocutors. As it comes to the previous point, the topic of my research and my interest in Artsakh already indicated to my interlocutors that for me Artsakh is seen. Yet, not completely. When we touched upon their memories from different places in Artsakh, especially for those interview partners from diaspora and from Armenia, an interesting contrast surfaced. They were highlighting the awareness that what they had imagined or what they were expecting to see of Artsakh, in particular after the war, didn't match the reality they experienced, once they were there in person. This contradiction between expectation and

reality was communicated as an important breakthrough for themselves, and as something very distinctive for understanding Artsakh's resilience. And on a second note, it was brought up as something which completes your knowledge of Artsakh. These contradictions referred to the nature, to cities, villages and the civic infrastructures after the war, local Artsakhtsi's demeanour, the overall atmosphere of the place, but also the storyteller's own emotional response – "I knew it was beautiful, but I never expected to be surrounded by such a deep green" (Narine*, 14.09), "it was so clean and calm, I was prepared for something more intense so soon after the war" (Gayane*, 14.09), "people have not lost their warmth and hospitality, I was expecting it will be much harder to connect after the war" (Sose, 02.09). These recollections revealed that although I can see Artsakh through their eyes, the picture I have been compiling will remain incomplete as long as I don't see it with my own eyes. It was this that made the absence so obvious and made me critically question how I interact with this unseen Artsakh. In the context of my research and under the circumstances of the ceasefire situation at the time, this very real place became an unseen, virtual site, which I was able to study only through the narratives of my research partners. This shift is remarkably symbolic of the entire project of Artsakh's self-determination and how it treads a fine line between being seen and unseen, and between existing and being an imagined place.

(6) CONCLUSIONS

This thesis proceeds from the assumption that collective self-determination is not a one-time act of claim and external recognition or rejection in response. But it is a continuous process of negotiation and reclaiming of the collective identity, with an ultimate goal to increase the political emancipation of the peoples, who struggle for this right. In this concluding chapter, the time is ripe to summarize the central empirical findings, to wrap up how they address the research question and, ultimately, to discuss what loose ends are left for future research, which cannot be a subject of wrapping up in the scope of the current analysis.

Processuality

Already the introduction to the theoretical debates on the notion of self-determination made it evident that we are tackling a concept charged with great potential to cultivate democratic action from below, while also presenting an insurmountable challenge to the international legal logic and geopolitical architecture. The first chapter of this thesis traced the various lines of thought, which eventually converge into the conceptual conundrum that hinders not only scholars, researchers, and legal and political practitioners, but also the very people who pursue their right to self-determination. In this venture, through the dense web of ideas that set the foundation of my research, the inputs of two authors emerge as particularly valuable points for understanding the insights sprouting from the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the dispositions in Artsakh and Armenian societies. The first one is Waldron's identity based conception of self-determination, in which he draws attention to the necessity to distinguish the capacity of political communities, which on the basis of shared multilayered collective identity, pursue their right to collective self-determination and political sovereignty, in a sense broader than self-governance over a disputed territory (Waldron, 2010). The second highlight is Frédéric Mégret's idea that self-determination is a right to be earned and in its core it constitutes a continuous process of demanding recognition and exercising it as an equal entity among other self-determining peoples (Mégret, 2016). Additionally, Mégret makes the important remark that the claims for collective self-determination result of severe experiences of systemic injustice

(ibid: 52), which is why it is so important to not dismiss self-determination projects simply as secessionist endeavours or territorial appetites.

Against this background, the encounters, and the acquaintances I made during my fieldwork supported the guiding premise to approach the aspiration for self-determination of the people from Artsakh as an unceasing process of collective political action, which is manifested through constant negotiation and reclaiming of the collective Armenian identity and experiences of the frozen conflict with its occasional but deadly escalations. If we break down the central research question and focus on the first part, namely: *how is self-determination understood, experienced and talked about by people in their everyday life?* — my short answer would be: through processuality. My interlocutors, each with their individual experience of the conflict and a handful of stories to make sense of it, have unveiled that they perceive the self-determination of Artsakh as a collective effort that will outlast the conflict itself. The movement towards self-determination precedes what we today know as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and there are strong convictions that even in the worst case scenario the self-determination of Artsakh in some shape and form will persist. At the same time, while the very exercise of the right to self-determination is considered to belong to the Artsakhtsi alone, the wider Armenian community displays readiness to fill in their relational roles in the comprehensive process of self-determination.

Here, the starting point of grasping the process of self-determination in Artsakh and Armenia is put forth by grappling with it as a perpetual negotiation and reclaiming of the collective Armenian identity. This wording of the hypothesis was formulated at a very early stage of the research, and now, when all the findings have had time to proof, I realize that this emphasis was not coincidental. It is important to speak of the making and remaking of the collective Armenian identities with regard to the self-determination of Artsakh, as this produces the political communities-in-relation that carry the effort forward. However, the very process of self-determination encompasses a multitude of social, political, cultural and economic actions and engagements enacted throughout all societal levels. In the aftermath of the 2020 war and during the subsequent ceasefire, my interlocutors narrate the steps of realizing self-determination in particular as revealed by the manifold practices of and towards resilience. Resilience is understood both as ingrained in Armenians — an essential element of the Armenian identity, which has been cultivated in the past and is passed down the generations; but it is also something

that requires urgent, but attentive and coherent contribution from all members of Armenian society to strengthen the resilience of the people from Artsakh and of Armenians as a whole. These practices of resilience have become part of the everyday lives of people, and just as they help to mobilize horizontal resilience, they are also utilized as a path to the preservation of peoples' own capacities to be resilient in the face of the conflict and its consequences.

Parallel to resilience appears the idea of collective responsibility. In my research, it unfolds as a lens trough which people make sense of the different intersecting Armenian identities and how they are positioned in relation to each other. The question of responsibility illuminates how people perceive themselves (and the collective they are part of) as actors with agency and stakes in the process of self-determination, even if they are not necessarily the ones to directly claim and exercise this right. Both the practices of resilience and the acts of taking up responsibility sustain the process of self-determination by allowing the different groups, which complete the wider political community that upholds the claim for the right to self-determination for Artsakh, to understand each other better and navigate the intergroup dynamics towards the goal of self-determination.

Temporality

The other aspect, to which this thesis devoted plenty of space, is the discussion of the specific temporality of the post-2020 war ceasefire stage of the conflict, how it affects people, and how it impacts the process of self-determination. In one word, this temporality can be rendered with *uncertainty*. Following the lines of thoughts of Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1977/1969), the great theorists of rites of passage and the notion of liminality, the uncertainty experienced in Artsakh and Armenia coming out of the war is an embodiment of the protracted peak transition towards, we can presume, the objective of self-determination, a "meaningful solution of the conflict" and peace.

The temporality of uncertainty is important not only because it encompasses all aspects of life. Furthermore, the accounts of the experienced uncertainty address the second half of the research question — *in what ways the unceasing process of self-determination for Artsakh substantiates through personal narratives the identity negotiation of (Artsakh-)Armenians?* The practices of resilience and the actions encouraging taking up responsibility characterize how self-determination is being practised and implemented under uncertainty. The temporality of

uncertainty conditions and shapes how these practices are put into action, and to an extent also at what purposes they are aimed at first, e.g. to alleviate uncertainty and help people cope with it by strengthening the collective resilience. But what is more, uncertainty modifies how people approach the reflection of one's own identity in the context of the multiple Armenian identities, and thus binds this process of identity negotiation (*as per* Ting-Toomey, 2015) to this specific temporality. We see how uncertainty appears as a lens to reason how these identities intersect, how they are positioned to each other, and what mutual responsibilities it evokes to one another, but also towards the process of self-determination.

My interlocutors' insights illuminate that uncertainty itself is dynamic and ambiguous and intertwines with the individual experiences and backgrounds, through which it manifests differently for different people. The examples presented above display that uncertainty can expose existing vulnerabilities or shake the trust in previously reliable social and political anchors, but that simultaneously it can be a mobilizing force if coupled with other force majeure circumstances.

Understanding the logic and influence of this temporality is pivotal for the examination of the processuality of self-determination and to grasp the specificities arising from the different temporal modalities. In this sense, the findings of this research are bound to the paradigm of uncertainty of the period from right after the beginning of the 2020 war, moving through almost two years of ceasefire, to the September attacks on the Armenian border in 2022. That is, the current aspiration for self-determination, which translates into everyday practices of resilience, as well as the identity negotiation between the intersecting Armenian identities realized through reflection on responsibility can transform profoundly, if the temporality of uncertainty somehow changes due to developments of the conflict, and thus how the process of realising the collective self-determination will shift, assuming new shape.

Loose ends

In the text, I have already woven in some peripheral topics and questions that I came across during the preliminary research, the fieldwork, and the subsequent writing up that require their own dedicated in-depth research. On the one hand, the exploration of the process of self-determination can be continued with attention focused more closely on the gender dynamics, some of the specific vulnerabilities of different affected groups, and more comprehensive

engagement solely with the population of Artsakh. On the other hand, the more novel avenues for research arising from my pondering, is the question of apathy — what does it symptomize in a frozen conflict, how it interacts with the idea of responsibility, and what impacts it bears on the collective consciousness? Likewise, the idea of collective resilience in frozen conflict as a point of assembly of hopes, dreams, and disappointments can be studied more precisely to understand the emerging social mechanisms that help the broader Armenian society to navigate the experiences of the conflict. Insights from all these research scopes bear the potential to be immensely useful for designing and nourishing future efforts for grassroots peacebuilding.

However, from the current position at the end of this research journey, even though I am more than ever convinced that such research is vital, it is hard for me to imagine how valuable insights can be used for immediate actions towards peace. I have stated earlier that time did not stand still while I was in the field and the dynamics of the conflict have influenced the dynamics with my interlocutors. Time did not stand still also after I completed my empirical research. In this sense, the biggest loose end that I leave unaddressed in this thesis are the developments that took place from December 2022 on.

On December 12, 2022, Azerbaijan, in the face of soon confirmed tied to the government environmental activists, blocked the Lachin corridor, the only connection between Armenia and Artsakh. This event was the beginning of a 10 months long blockade, which resulted in a full-scale humanitarian crisis due to lacking food, medicine and medical care, and disrupted supply of gas, electricity, and water. The blockade ended with another military offensive that lasted only one day. The result of this is that the entire Armenian population of Artsakh, more than 100 000 people, was forced to flee to Armenia and the de facto Republic of Artsakh will cease to exist as of January 1, 2024. This is a very blunt and insufficient summary of the terrible situation which was unfolding unabashedly in full view, with barely any consequences for the perpetrators. My point of bringing this hurried recap, however, is that this situation left manifold open questions, which will benefit from attentive and responsible research, not only to shed light on what happened during the months under siege, but hopefully also to uncover knowledge that will help us prevent such hideous situations elsewhere in the future. Finalizing this thesis took me much longer than I have initially planned, although it was constantly on my mind. But the situation unfolding in Artsakh spilled over the stage of processing the findings and putting them into words. So, for me personally, the loose end, I am left with to tackle once I put the full stop

here, will be to reflect and explore in what ways the physical blockade of the embodiment of my research subject was mirrored in the inability and the difficulties I experienced in the course of writing-up this thesis.

Now, taking a step back, what is my main conclusion from spending over a year and half looking into the notion of self-determination in the literature and on the ground, equipped with anthropological sensitivity? It seems to me that in the current global geopolitical architecture we don't have the capacity, nor the physical and mental opportunities, to imagine an idea of self-determination different from the model rooted in Western and euro-centric hierarchies and values. It might be hard to admit, but self-determination proves to be an exceptionally opportune example of how neoliberal and neocolonial logic has been soaking into the principles of international law and the human rights framework. In the current practices, we see self-determination that is understood as transactional, in which external participation or non-participation are guided by the principles of reaping benefits, and the question of providing support for the people struggling for self-determination is assessed through the prospect of gains and losses.

The tragic developments taking place in Artsakh in the months after the completion of the fieldwork, demonstrate unequivocally how important it is to engage with this issue. Self-determination is not simply a legal instrument to enable or prevent geopolitical change. Due to its conceptual stalemate, not only is it ineffective in practice, but it also has dire consequences over the lives of people. Engaged, critical and inclusive academic debate can potentially contribute to the minimization of further violence, injustice, and suffering.

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Gayane* & Narine*. 2022. Personal communication. September 14, 2022. Yerevan

7.3 List of figures

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APPENDIX

ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

The right to self-determination of peoples was coined to be a productive and emancipatory mechanism of international law, yet both in theory and practice it remains ambiguous. While the inherent conundrums of self-determination present fruitful grounds for intellectual debates, the reality remains that many people struggle to use it as a framework for their independence in the face of various challenges and injustices.

The aim of this master's thesis is to engage critically and from an anthropological perspective with the complex notion of self-determination against the backdrop of its framing in international law and the human rights discourse. The exploration commences from the hypothesis that self-determination is not a linear pursuit of recognition, but a continuous process of negotiation and reclaiming of identity towards a collective right to be earned and not simply granted (Mégret, 2016). The research is based on the concrete example of Armenia and the unrecognized Republic of Artsakh. The central research question – how is self-determination understood, experienced and talked about in everyday life and in what ways the unceasing process of self-determination for Artsakh substantiates the identity negotiation of (Artsakh-)Armenians? — guides the attempt to illuminate close-up personal perspectives from the protracted Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and especially in the aftermath of the 2020 war. The particular uncertain temporality of a ceasefire, under which the fieldwork takes place, shapes both the theoretical and methodological approaches to answering the research question. Theoretically, self-determination is examined through the concept of liminality, as a social practice of resilience and through that as a fertile ground for identity negotiation. In order to gather empirical material a multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in Armenia in the period of late June to September 2022, whereby the following primary qualitative research methodologies were employed: (participant) observation and participant observations in events; expert, narrative and *collaborative* interviews.

The analysis of the collected insights shows that for the research partners the question of Karabakh's self-determination remains pivotal, nonetheless depending on their personal scarring, losses and disappointments from the conflict the preoccupation with it is ubiquitous, yet highly ambivalent. In the narration of the past two years, it transpires that self-determination is not thought of only in collective and future terms, but also as an outlook to make sense of the personal past. Most importantly, in the instances in which the pursuit of collective self-determination is perceived as hopeless, the interlocutors internalize it as a path to building present and future resilience.

The tragic developments taking place in Nagorno-Karabakh in the months after the completion of the fieldwork, demonstrate unequivocally how important it is to engage with this issue. Self-determination is not simply a legal instrument to enable or prevent geopolitical change, but due to its conceptual stalemate has dire consequences over the lives of people. Engaged, critical and inclusive academic debate can potentially contribute to the minimization of further violence, injustice, and suffering.

ABSTRACT (DEUTSCH)

Das Selbstbestimmungsrecht wurde als produktiver und emanzipatorischer Mechanismus des Völkerrechts bezeichnet, bleibt aber sowohl in der Theorie als auch in der Praxis zweideutig. Während die der Selbstbestimmung innewohnenden Probleme einen idealen Nährboden für intellektuelle Debatten bieten, bleibt die Realität, dass viele Menschen damit kämpfen, das Selbstbestimmungsrecht als Rahmen für ihre Unabhängigkeit angesichts verschiedener Herausforderungen und Ungerechtigkeiten zu nutzen.

Ziel dieser Masterarbeit ist es, sich aus einer anthropologischen Perspektive kritisch mit dem komplexen Begriff der Selbstbestimmung auseinanderzusetzen, und zwar vor dem Hintergrund seiner Einbettung im Völkerrecht und im Menschenrechtsdiskurs. Die Untersuchung geht von der Hypothese aus, dass Selbstbestimmung kein lineares Streben nach Anerkennung ist, sondern ein kontinuierlicher Prozess der Verhandlung und der Rückgewinnung von Identität im Hinblick auf ein kollektives Recht, das verdient und nicht einfach gewährt werden muss (Mégret, 2016). Die Untersuchung basiert sich auf dem konkreten Beispiel Armeniens und der nicht anerkannten Republik Arzach. Die zentrale Forschungsfrage – wie wird Selbstbestimmung im Alltag verstanden, erlebt und besprochen und auf welche Weise begründet der andauernde Prozess der Selbstbestimmung für Arzach die Identitätsaushandlung von (Arzach-)Armeniern? - leitet den Versuch, persönliche Perspektiven auf den andauernden Bergkarabach-Konflikt und insbesondere auf die Zeit nach dem 2020 Krieg zu beleuchten. Die besondere und ungewisse Temporalität eines Waffenstillstands, unter der die Feldforschung stattfindet, prägt sowohl die theoretischen als auch die methodischen Ansätze zur Beantwortung der Forschungsfrage. Theoretisch wird Selbstbestimmung durch das Konzept der Liminalität, als soziale Praxis der Resilienz und dadurch als Nährboden zur Identitätsaushandlung untersucht. Um empirisches Material zu sammeln, wurde im Zeitraum von Ende Juni bis September 2022 in Armenien eine *multi-sited* ethnografische Feldforschung durchgeführt, wobei die folgenden primären qualitativen Forschungsmethoden zum Einsatz kamen: (teilnehmende) Beobachtung und teilnehmende Beobachtung bei Veranstaltungen; Experten-, narrative und kollaborative Interviews.

Die Auswertung der gesammelten Erkenntnisse zeigt, dass für die ForschungspartnerInnen die Frage der Selbstbestimmung Bergkarabachs nach wie vor von zentraler Bedeutung ist, die Beschäftigung mit ihr jedoch je nach persönlichen Wunden, Verlusten und Enttäuschungen durch den Konflikt allgegenwärtig, aber höchst ambivalent ist. In den Erzählungen über die vergangenen zwei Jahre zeigt sich, dass Selbstbestimmung nicht nur in kollektiven und zukünftigen Begriffen gedacht wird, sondern auch als eine Perspektive, um der persönlichen Vergangenheit einen Sinn zu geben. Vor allem in den Fällen, in denen das Streben nach kollektiver Selbstbestimmung als aussichtslos empfunden wird, verinnerlichen die GesprächspartnerInnen Selbstbestimmung als einen Weg zum Aufbau gegenwärtiger und zukünftiger Resilienz.

Die tragischen Entwicklungen in Bergkarabach in den Monaten nach dem Abschluss der Feldforschung zeigen eindeutig, wie wichtig es ist, sich mit diesem Thema zu beschäftigen. Das Selbstbestimmungsrecht ist nicht nur ein Rechtsinstrument, um geopolitische Veränderungen zu ermöglichen oder zu verhindern, sondern aufgrund seiner begrifflichen Pattsituation hat schreckliche Folgen für das Leben der Menschen. Eine engagierte, kritische und inklusive wissenschaftliche Debatte kann dazu beitragen, weitere Gewalt, Ungerechtigkeit und Leiden zu minimieren.