The Impact of Historical Narratives on Ethnic Conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia

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Abstract

The narratives that presented from historical events and accepted by everyone gradually form the collective memory of a nation or an ethnic group. Collective memory is gradually become inflexible and unchanging in connection with other nations or groups. This will be more complicated if two rival groups in a country or region find their existence in the widespread acceptance of their narrative from common historical events. In general, myths, historical narratives and collective memory are used as tools for shaping ethnic and national identities in different societies. This is a positive function of existing narratives from historical events. Moreover, these are used as a tool to change the balance in conflicts, especially historical conflicts in many areas and among many ethnic groups. In this regard, the present study focuses on the dual function of historical narratives that used in important ethnic conflicts in the South Caucasus. These narratives will be very important in understanding of formation and continuity of ethnic-territorial conflicts in this region. Therefore, in this study, the role of myths, historical narratives, and collective memory in shaping the ethnic identity, as well as, the impact of these factors on the escalation of the most important ethnic conflicts in the South Caucasus region have been studied.

Keywords

Collective Memory, Ethnic Conflicts, Historical Narratives, Identity Construction, Myth-Making, South Caucasus

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Introduction

Myths and historical narratives are among the most important tools of identity construction in different societies. In general, historical events are the basis for the formation of myths and various narratives that helps to develop them over time, and ultimately in this way, the nation or ethnic group's collective memory is form. The historical memory is an effective tool for nation or group identity construction. Historical Narratives and memory by highlighting some of the identity elements and most important historical events do identity construction function. Therefore, these factors are among the most important tools for identity construction and nation-building among ethnic and national groups. However, this function does not always occur peacefully and sometimes there is disagreement between rival ethnic groups in a country or region over the truth of historical events. In this case each of these group present different narratives of common historical events, and gradually, these narratives play an important role in defining each group of their existence. This will also become more complicated if these clashes related to the conflict over a particular territory .In this case, the function of historical narratives in relation to other groups will become negative and by highlighting some aspects of historical events and instrumental usage from them, elites find their identity in the distant past and confirm the truth of their claims about a particular territory.

There are many ethnic groups in the South Caucasus region that have historical and long-standing conflicts with together. Most ethnic conflicts in this region have territorial dimensions. In modern era, the ethnic elites in this region by highlighting some of the identity elements and historical narratives in the face of rival ethnic groups performed the identity construction process (Koolaee & Nezami 2019). These actions led to the formation of distinct ethnic identities for these groups in the nationalism era, but at the same time influenced the ethnic conflicts in this region over time. In this paper, using

analytical and content analysis methods, the important ethnic tensions in the South Caucasus are examined in the light of disputed narratives of historical facts. The unresolved ethnic clashes in this region are illustrates that the root of these conflicts is located in the identity conflict between these groups. This has formed over time, so that the ethnic conflicts in this region can be examined from this perspective.

As mentioned, the analyses method in the present study is the content analyses method. For more than six decades, this method has played an important role in the process of scientific analyses in the journalism, communications, psychology, sociology, and other fields. This method, which is one of the best methods in quantitative and qualitative researches, generally deals with the systematic analyses of messages (Neuendorf 2017). These messages are hidden in books, texts and documents. This method can be used to identification and documentation of the attitudes, views and interests of individuals and groups (Drisko & Maschi 2016). Therefore, in this method, the written and unwritten texts, books and works are examined to discover of true of them. Therefore, in this paper, using the content analyses method, have been analyzed the important works and texts that written by Armenian, Azeri, Georgian, Abkhazian and Ossetian elites. These works gradually have made contradictory historical narratives and also has become a ground for creation and strengthen important ethnic conflicts in the South Caucasus.

In the study of works related to the historical narratives and collective memory issues in the South Caucasus, several cases can be mentioned. For example, Rauf Garagozov, in his essays" Collective Memory of Ethnopolitical Conflict: The Case of Nagorno Karabakh" ,(2006) "Historical Narratives, Cultural Traditions, and Collective Memory in the Central Caucasus (2008) " and" Azerbaijani History and Nationalism in the Soviet and Post-Soviet

Periods: Challenges and Dilemmas (2012) "examines the impact of historical narratives on the formation of Azeri national identity and the emergence and escalation of historical conflicts between Armenians and Azeris in the past and present. In an article entitled" History in the Context of the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict ,(2014) "George Hewitt discusses the differences between the Georgians and Abkhazians ethnic features and the impact of these factors on historical conflicts between them. In his article entitled" Historical Narratives and Post-Conflict Reconciliation: An Experiment in Azerbaijan " ,(2015)Scott Radnitz also examines the impact of the historical mentality of Armenians and Azeris to each other on the emergence of contemporary conflicts between them. Kristina Khutsishvili in her article entitled" Myself and the other: Competitive Narratives of Georgians and Abkhazians ,(2018) " examines the similarities between Georgian and Abkhazian nationalist elements and new trends in the presentation of contradictory historical narratives on social media by them. It should be noted that these works have been successful in providing a comprehensive image of the process of historical mentality formation among the ethnic groups in the South Caucasus and the impact of this factor on the emergence of nationalist forces in this region. However, these works have not been very successful in examining the role of the formation of historical narratives and collective memory over time and their impact on contemporary ethnic conflicts and the make of causal relationships between collective memory and historical conflicts in the South Caucasus. The present study is an attempt to address these defects in existing scientific resources.

Historical Narratives and Collective Memory; A Tool for Identity Construction or Continuity of Historical Conflicts

In general, historical myths and narratives are capable of expressing the inner truth about peoples and nations (Berger 2009, 491), act as a guide to

current actions and strive to create a national identity. The narratives, function as cognitive shortcuts through which a few pieces of information are woven together to create a story that explains the country in question (Mitchell 2009, 87).The ethnic and national identities are created based on historical myths. The myths identify members as well as enemies of the group, and form the group's collective memory over time. Collective memory refers to beliefs, feelings, and moral judgments about the past that are reformed over time (Halbwachs 1980, 1992; Zerubavel 2003; Conway 2010; Ugur Cinar 2015; Wang 2018). Collective memory has been a part of contemporary academic discourse since the 1920s, especially since the publication of Maurice Halbwachs's works (Roudometof 2002; Wertsch & Roediger 2008). Halbwachs by stating that individual memory is understood only in the context of a group and unites a nation developed the concept of collective memory (García-Gavilanes et al. 2017). Owning history is at the conceptual core of collective memory studies. In this process, the selective interpretations of the past are used for contemporary social and political ends (French 2012,   .(339-338 Therefore, collective memory signifies narratives of past experience constituted by specific groups within which they find meaningful forms of identification that may empower (Weedon & Jordan 2012, 143). On the other hand, collective and historical memory influences actors 'interpretation and understanding of the external world and a particular situation such as conflicts. Collective memory can justify the outbreak of the conflict and the course of its development. In intractable conflicts, a group's beliefs of collective memory present positive images of the group itself, as the group engages in intense self-justification, self-glorification, and self-praise. A group's beliefs of collective memory present its own group as being a victim of the opponent (Wang 2018, 28). However, the most important function of historical memory is its role in

shaping a group's identity. Over the past decades, scholars of nationalism have suggested that modern nations are involved in rituals, the construction of national myths, and other symbolic elements that help construct and maintain the people's sense of belonging to an imagined community (Roudometof 2002, 7). For example, the modernists such as Benedict Anderson, Tom Nairn, Ernest Gellner, and Eric Hobsbawm emphasize on the mythical aspects of a nation and the role of myths in the formation of nations. Historical narratives, on the other hand, can explain the dynamics of conflicts and the causes of occurrence or escalation conflicts between ethnic groups. Therefore, myths and historical narratives have a dual function in the process of identity construction. Examining the function of myths, narratives, and historical memory in the relations of ethnic groups and nations with each other reveals the different and sometimes contradictory cases. Many scholars believe that myths and historical narratives play an important role in a nation identity construction. In fact, key historical events are powerful ethnic group markers. Certain struggles the group has endured, such as past losses, defeat, and severe humiliation, also shape group identity and bind the people together (Wang 2018, 16-15). In general, the construction of national identity using the identity markers is the most important step in the process of nation-building. Nation-building promotes national identity with the establishment of national symbols, such as anthems or flags, together with the (re)creation of historical myths or cultural markers (Kurian 2011, 1088). Anthony Smith argues that:

> "Symbolic self-definition; myth-making and memory-selection; legal standardisation and ritual codification; and the territorialisation of memory: these are some of the key social and symbolic processes which allow us to chart the formation –and dissolution– of nations (Smith 2002: 23)

In general, in nationalist studies there are three main approaches to examining the historical memory's function in the process of group identity construction. Primordialists believe that identity and collective memory are formed based on the primordial ties such as blood, kinship, language, and common history. Instrumentalists believe that the past is often used instrumentally in promoting individual or collective interests and history becomes an important tool for competing elites to solidify power and gain public support. Instrumentalist thinkers believe that elites use from many elements of ethnic or national identity in their struggle against other ethnic and national groups. For example, Partha Chatterjee shows how elites first imagined the nation into being in spiritual dimension and then readied it for political contest, all the while normalizing the aspirations of the various marginal groups that typify the spiritual sphere (Chatterjee 1986, 1993). Arshin Adib-Moghaddam also by what he terms psycho-nationalism shows that the psychological dynamics have an important role in the making of nations. He believes that elites utilised from psychological and political roots of national identity for achieve to their goals (Adib-Moghaddam 2018).

Constructivists, on the other hand, view identity as manufactured and express that ethnicity and identity are socially constructed. They believe that identity is a social construction that is constantly changing. Therefore, the constructivist researchers focus on the influence of historical myths on the construction of ethnic or national identity. Therefore, these thinkers believe that identity is constantly evolving and changing. They believe that the historical myths and narratives define members and enemies of group and the ethnic or national identity in the process of intergroup conflicts is constantly being made and changed. For example, Homi Bhabha states that ethnic or national identity is an open ended process and this is always being redefined and becoming. He

believes that identity is a conceptual issue that is constructed in the context of cultural disputes and differences (Bhabha 1990). Eric Hobsbawm, as well as, considers the nation and ethnic or national identity to be changeable entities. He believes that the basis of an ethnic group as a social construct is cultural (Hobsbawm 1983, 1990).

On the other hand, it should be noted that myths, narratives, and historical memory, accomplish their identity construction's function in constructive or destructive forms. In many cases, a group's collective memory performs this function by highlighting some of the historical events in confronting with others. In fact, it is the negative function of narratives and historical memory that can affects the continuity of historical clashes between rival groups. Many researchers believe that the contradictory narratives from the past have always been at the center of ethnic and national conflicts, and historical memory is created and manipulated by the elites as a social narrative and a tool for mobilizing the people. Historical cases also show that the many of the persistent conflicts -from Europe to the Middle East-, have been root in the history and memory of the parties (Jedlicki 1999; Mcbride 2001; Roudometof 2002; Wang 2018). Therefore, sometimes historical narratives and myths become politicized and become a factor in escalating tensions between rival groups. Political myth is one of the categories of perception that provides structure and content to symbolic discourse. Political myth may be defined as a narrative of past events that gives them special significance for the present and the future. Myth creates or reinforces political identities and generates authority for those who wield or hope to wield political power. Through political discourse, myth serves to establish a collective memory that links the members of an existing or prospective group with its predecessors and successors in a single symbolic universe, providing legitimacy for existing or desired political roles and institutions (Sherlock 2007, 3). In many societies, compromise

between rival groups is faces with the psychological and persistent effects of violence. Such barriers can be seen over the years in the inflexible identities and their confrontation with rival groups. The nationalist elites continue to these polarizations by presentation the unilateral narratives of conflicts. Where both sides of a conflict are subjected to narratives of victimization and nationalist rhetoric, former adversaries are unlikely to reconcile. Therefore, scholars have long recognized that violent conflict engenders political and psychological processes that prevent reconciliation between groups. The parties to a conflict tend to develop conflicting narratives that emphasize their own group's victimization and blame the other side exclusively. Elites selectively emphasize or ignore events from history and recombine them into meaningful narratives to form a coherent but tendentious retelling of the past. When institutionalized by states through official symbols, textbooks, and the media, and then disseminated and shared by the public, these narratives assume a taken-for-granted quality and cannot be easily challenged (Radnitz 2015, 2-1). This makes the existing narratives inflexible and the conflicts between the parties intensify, over time. Stuart Kaufman argues that the violence between ethnic groups is a consequence of these groups identity, which he calls it mythical-symbolic complexities. These complexities are narratives of an ethnic group culture. According to Kaufman, the existence of a sense of enmity between ethnic groups is the result of such narratives and the violence is consequences of these emotions. According to Kaufman's symbolic politics theory, if the accepted ethnic symbols and myths justify hostility with other groups, people will react to ethnic symbols and will mobilize to fight with them. According to this theory, the main reasons for the ethnic violence are the group's myths, which justify the hostilities and nationalist policies of the mass mobilization (Kaufman 2001; 2006).

Some scholars disagree with these opinions. Fearon and Laitin, for example, argue that the myths or historical discourses cannot explain the consequences of ethnic policies (Fearon & Laitin .(2000However, motives and arguments drawn from history play an important role in most conflicts between nations or ethnic groups, and they usually make those conflicts much more difficult to resolve (Jedlicki 1999, 226-225). Scholars believe that the long‑standing conflicts play an important role in shaping a group's identity. When there has historically been conflict between groups, the individuals tend to judge one another not on individual characteristics but rather on group affiliation. Therefore, conflict can assist generating and sustaining social identity. Enmity passes from one generation to the next when traumatic events are absorbed into a group's identity; though later generations never experienced the events, they share its suffering (Wang 2018, 17-14). Therefore, collective memory is an important factor in the political culture of societies, especially in relation to other groups (Langenbacher & Shain .(2010Therefore, the group fears and myths justify hostility and lead to powerfully hostile mass attitudes. These hostile narratives provide a symbolic vocabulary that the leaders use them as tools to mobilize support (Kaufman 2006, 48). If we agree with Linda Radzik's argument that the historical memory creates collective responsibility among hostile societies (Radzik 2014); it can be concluded that the historical memory over time shapes the relations of different groups and societies in various forms, and can be understood many of the current hostilities in this context.

Ethnic Conflicts in the South Caucasus; the Impact of Myths and Historical Narratives

One of the most important features of the South Caucasus region is the variety of ethnic groups and the existence of long‑standing and continuous conflicts between many of them. Many of these conflicts, which have been

linked to the concept of territory ,are currently continuing without a peaceful solution. In the following, the most important ethnic-territorial conflicts in this region in terms of the ethnic group's historical narratives effect on the process of formation and continuity of them, have been analyzed.

Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

The history of the Karabakh region in modern times is linked to the conflict between Armenians and Azeris over its historical ownership. Since the middle ages, the province of Karabakh was fought over by rival empires before being absorbed into Imperial Russia in 1813. Armenians and Azeris were intermingled in cities and towns in the South Caucasus for centuries, and ethnic differences became politically salient only in the late nineteenth century. After nationalism infiltrated the region, violent clashes between Armenians and Azeris broke out during political upheaval in Russia, particularly in 1905and 1918, and left bitter memories on both sides. Finally, under Soviet rule Nagorno-Karabakh was designated an autonomous republic of the Azeri Soviet Socialist Republic in .1923With the advent of Gorbachev's reforms in the late 1980s, an emergent movement of Armenians in Karabakh launched demonstrations and petitioned Moscow to formally transfer the territory to Armenia, leading to counter-mobilization by Azeris. Eventually, when the Soviet Union collapsed, the intercommunal conflict became an international war (Radnitz 2015, 5). In general, Armenians and Azeris have done widespread history-making in recent decades to justify their territorial claims. The important role of contradictory historical narratives or even myths on the conflicts process can be seen in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (Garagozov 2006). The collapse of the Soviet Union has been a turning point in escalation of Azeris and Armenian efforts to make the

narratives from historical events (Garagozov 2012). However, the roots of these history-makings go back to centuries ago, especially the nineteenth century. For example, many ancient Azeri narratives have been written about the history of Karabakh; Such as" *Garabag-Name* ,"a work written in the 1840s by Mirza Adygezalbek in the Azeri language, or" *The History of Karabakh* ,"by Mirza Dzhamal Dzhevanshir of Karabakh, written in 1847, and" *The History of the Karabakh Khanate* "written in Russian by Akhmedbek Dzhevanshir in 1883(Garagozov 2008, 56-54). These works have been sought to recognize the belonging of the Karabakh region to the Azeris. In general, the Azeris claim that the Karabakh region has historically been under Azeris rule. In general, historical schools emerged in Azerbaijan after the Second World War which insisted that the Turkic languages in general and the Azerbaijani language in particular spread throughout what is now Azerbaijani territory long before the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD. Modern Azerbaijani historians also argue that the Turkic family of languages was always predominant in the region of western Asia, where their use was already widespread by the third to first millennia BC (Smith et al. 1998, 52-51). These narratives, which developed in the twentieth century, were nationalist elite attempts to use from Azeri identity as effective tool in nation-building project. Azerbaijani scholars argued that the Azerbaijani people were descended from the local Albanians, who were Iranianised in the first millennium BC and began to assimilate with Turkic-speaking newcomers during the first millennium AD (Smith et al. 1998, 51-50). Azeri scholars consider Albanians as ancestors of modern-day Azerbaijanis and reject all theories about the Armenianization of Albanians. In contrast, Armenian historians consider Albanians to be uncivilized tribes that were influenced by the spread of Armenian culture in the region. Azeri scholars have also argued the existence of an ethnic link between Turks and Albanians and a Turkic

element may very well have played an important role in the social and cultural development of Albania in the second half of the first millennium (Cornell 2001, 51). In fact, Azeris by introducing themselves as Caucasian Albanians have created a widespread ethnic identity. On the other hand, some Azerbaijani mythmakers claim to find a distinctly Azerbaijani culture even among the Stone Age inhabitants of the country. The mainstream narrative, however, starts with the" first state formations on the territory of Azerbaijan, "those of the ninth-century B.C.E. Mannai (prior to the Armenian migration into the region). The story continues with the emergence of the Kingdom of Atropatene in what is now Iranian Azerbaijan after the destruction of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great in the late fourth century B.C.E. Obscuring the fact that Atropatene was culturally Iranian rather than Turkic, the mythmakers claim that" the language of the territory was, apparently, the same as what later became known as Azeri. "More important is the kingdom of the linguistically Caucasian people known as Albanians, whose first organized state emerged in the second century C.E. Azerbaijani mythology uses" Azerbaijan "and "Albania "interchangeably in discussing this kingdom. Azerbaijani myth also argues that the Albanians were assimilated by the Turkic groups, so modem Azerbaijanis are the descendants of the Albanians. Azerbaijani myth, on the other and, link their historical claims mainly to Nagorno-Karabakh. The Azerbaijanis root their historical claim to Karabagh primarily on the observation that past administrative boundaries usually placed Karabagh under rulers based in modem Azerbaijan. Indeed, even before 1987, they engaged in an Aesopian debate with Armenian scholars, implying contemporary claims to Karabagh through historical arguments. Some Azerbaijani writers also added the point that the city of Shusha in the nineteenth century was a center of Azerbaijani culture (Kaufman 2001, 57-56). The tradition of Azeri

historiography has been mostly related to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In contrast, Armenian historiography has quite a long tradition of historical writing and is well equipped with historical narratives. Among the old Armenian historical narratives, the works of three famous authors namely Agathangelos, Moses Khorenats'i, and Egishe played a significant role in the preservation of the living Armenian tradition and creation their collective memory (Garagozov 2008). In general, Armenian scholars, in confronting with Azeris researchers, believe that the roots of Armenian ethnic identity go back to ancient times. Modern Armenian versions of ethnogenesis have attempted to integrate narratives of the ancient Hayasa polity, arguing that it played a central role in the emergence of the contemporary Armenian identity. Armenian historians began to identify Hayasa with the Armenian self-names 'Haj' and 'Hayastan', and claim that it was the most ancient polity established by the Armenians, dating back to the middle of the second millennium BC (Smith et al. 1998, 51). Armenians consider the long tradition of statehood, language and religion as important elements in formation their ethnic identity (Ishkanian 2008).

On the other hand, Armenian sources claim that Karabakh was the residence of Armenians and part of a great Armenian kingdom as early as the fourth century BC; nevertheless evidence of the area's incorporation into Armenian-controlled territory is conclusive only from the time of Tigran the Great. Therefore, according to Armenian historiography tradition the area of Mountainous Karabakh formed part of the greater Armenian states between the second century BC and 387AD. In 387, Armenia was split between the Byzantines and the Sassanid. The fate of Mountainous Karabakh in this context remains debated (Cornell, 2001: 50-48). After 428A.D., Karabakh was under the influence of Iranians, Arabs, Seljuks, Mongols, Turks, Iranians again, and finally the Russians. However, the most prominent were the Iranians and the

Russians; because these had the greatest impact on the further development of this region in terms of territory, population and politics. The Karabakh region kept a form of autonomy until the Arab invasions, with which most of Transcaucasia came under Arab rule until the late ninth century. Armenian sources claim that ever since this time' Mountainous Karabakh was the only part of Armenia. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the internal conflicts between the ruling families had destroyed the local Armenian elite in Karabakh. This led to the region slipping out of Armenian control, and a Turkic ruler managing to impose his rule and create a semi-independent dynastic state, the khanate of Karabakh, based in Shusha. In the first years of the nineteenth century, Russia tried to assert its influence over the khanates, and Karabakh was one of the first to accept Russian overlordship. Russian attempts to assert control over the region- despite the uprisings against the Russian influence- led to the conquests of a number of khanates between 1806and 1809, and ultimately to the first Russo-Persian war of 1812– 13(Cornell 2001, 53-51).

Nagorno-Karabakh after this War and the Treaty of Gulistan came under tsarist rule (Khansari Fard, Basiri & Yazdani 2019, .(184Ten years later, new insurrections took place in Karabakh and other khanates against Russia. These movements were supported by Iran, and thus resulted in a second Russo-Persian war which led to fresh Persian defeat, and the 1828Treaty of Turkmanchai. This was important as far as Karabakh is concerned since immediately after the treaty, Russia encouraged and organized a population exchange. Thus huge number of Armenians left Persian and Ottoman lands to settle in the Russian Caucasus, and respectively large numbers of Muslims left the South Caucasus for areas under Persian or Ottoman control (Cornell 2001, 54). According to these policies, the composition of the Nagorno-Karabakh population gradually changed in favor of the Armenians.

The Russian annexation of Karabakh from Persia was a significant event for the development of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict. The new administrative divisions imposed by the Russians, which ignored the geographical and historical boundaries of the local ethnic communities, particularly those of the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis, became a primary factor in ethnic confrontations in the second half of the nineteenth century (Geukjian 2012, -38 39). The political events in Russia gradually impacted on the fate of these two ethnic groups, as well as the Nagorno-Karabakh. Tensions of the Russian revolution of 1905, soon spread to Shusha in Western Karabakh, where the first inter-ethnic riots erupted and it killed many of Azeri and Armenian. Violence re-emerged in the summer of 1906in Karabakh, with wholesale battles waged between Armenian and Azeri village communities. Consequently, the city of Shusha became rigorously divided into an Armenian uptown and an Azeri downtown (Cornell 2001, 55). After the October Revolution of 1917, the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh sought to annexation this region into Armenia, which led to clashes between Armenians and Azeris. However, by consolidating the power of the Soviet government, the Nagorno-Karabakh became an autonomous Oblast within the Republic of Azerbaijan. Therefore, the ethno-territorial tension between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis developed during the Soviet rule and at the same time, with the end of the Soviet era, it became a full-scale war. Although, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has formed an important part of the history of relations between Armenians-Azeris, however, Armenian historical narratives in confronting with Azeris have broader dimensions. The overtly mythical Armenian story is that Armenians are descended from Haik, a great grandson of the Biblical Noah. The famous thinker Rafael Ishkhanian claims that Armenians were the aborigines of the Armenian plateau who have been living there continuously since the fourth millennium B.C.E. at the latest. Similar claims were promoted

in nationalist novels such as those of Sero Khanzatian published in the 1970s. Armenian histories claim the ancient kingdom of Urartu as forerunner to Armenia and emphasize the immigration of the Armenians to the region after that state's sixth-century B.C.E. collapse. Therefore, Armenians agree that their long-time habitation of certain territories, including Karabagh entitles them to possession of those territories regardless of the ethnicity of their current populations. Armenians anchor their claim to Karabagh by arguing that the indigenous Christian Albanians were Armenized after the medieval merger of the two churches and that Karabagh is dotted with hundreds of Armenian architectural monuments dating to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Karabagh also has great symbolic significance for Armenians because they see it as the only Armenian area to have retained autonomy throughout the dark years of Armenia's decline (Kaufman 2001, 54-52) and also after the division of the Armenian lands between Russia and Iran in the sixteenth century, this region was one of the areas that were ruled by the Armenian kingdoms. Therefore, this region is a symbol of the unity of the Armenian people. Thinkers such as the Ishkhanian have gone even further, claiming that the Armenian language already existed in Asia Minor in the third and even fourth millennium BC. In other words, Armenians are the only real inhabitants of the Armenian plateau. In fact, many of these historians seek to minimize the habitation of the Turks in Armenia, especially in Nagorno-Karabakh. On the other hand, the Azerbaijanis consider Karabakh to be a place where the Azeri modern identity emerged under the rule of the Muslim khans (Smith et al. 1998). Another case that has become a symbol of Armenian identity is the Armenian genocide by Ottoman Turks in 1915 (Rasooli Saniabadi & Roostaei 2018). After the Turkish Genocide of 1915, that self-image of martyrdom was vastly strengthened, with Turks cast as the timeless victimizer. According to

the Great Soviet Encyclopedia entry on Armenia, the conquest of Armenia by medieval Turkic groups-the Seljluks in the eleventh century and the Kara-koyunlu state in the fifteenth- led to the annihilation and massive extermination of the Armenian population (Kaufman 2001, 53). This is to find the historical traces of the gradual formation of the Armenian historical memory and the ethnic clashes between the Armenians and the Azeris.

Ethnic Conflicts in Georgia

History making has also been prominent in ethnic conflicts in Georgia, especially in relations between Georgians with Abkhazians and Ossetians. The most part of the conflicts between Georgians, Abkhazians, and Ossetians, of course, have been linked to the historical memory from Russians among Georgians (Shavtvaladze 2018; Kovtiak 2018; Khansari Fard, Basiri & Yazdani 2018). It should be noted that the Georgian historical narratives make up the collection of manuscripts known as *Kartlis Tskhovreba* ,which is mostly about the famous Georgian kings. This collection which took its final form in the eighteenth century includes various historical texts written by different authors and different times. One of the most important of these texts is Leonti Mroveli's work *The Lives of the Kings of Kartli* (Garagozov 2008). However, the link between these works with Georgian national identity took place from the nineteenth century onwards and with the spread of nationalism force. Since the 1850s, Georgian intellectual leaders were concerned with national identity and cultural survival. They initiated studies of the past of their country that became a source of national pride. They counteracted russification policies by publishing popular newspapers in Georgian and developing a national literature (Natsvlishvili 2015, 78) and moved toward identity construction. Georgian national mythology begins with the claim that from the second millennium B.C.E., western Transcaucasia was dominated by a single Colchian culture,

which was linguistically and therefore ethnically Kartvelian. The kingdom of Colchis, which existed from the sixth to the first centuries B.C.E., is therefore presented as the first Georgian state. The successor state to Colchis is the Kingdom of Egrisi which ruled western Georgia including Abkhazia from the second to the sixth centuries C.E. Another crucial event in Georgian national mythology is the fourth century conversion of Kartli and Egrisi to the Christian faith by St. Nino, establishing Georgia as a bastion of Christianity in a region. Georgian mythology emphasizes next the golden age of Georgian unity beginning in .1008David the Builder (1125-1089) unified all of modern Georgia and beyond. Under David's greatest successor, Queen Tamar (-1184 1212), Georgia achieved military superiority in the Near East and also reached its greatest cultural glories, including the creation of Georgia's great epic poem, Rustaveli's" *The Knight in the Panther Skin*) "Kaufman 2001, .(91Therefore, in recent years, a strong history making process has emerged among Georgian historians and elites. For example, Teimuraz Mikeladze argued that the powerful Kingdom of Colchis began its existence in western Georgia as early as the middle of the second millennium BC. He claimed that Colchis was governed by an independent ruler and comprised many large towns with well-developed crafts. Mikeladze argued that ancient Dioscurias (the modern Abkhazian capital Sukhumi) was initially a Colchian city. He therefore insisted that Georgian statehood   grew directly out of the Kingdom of Colchis, which survived and developed quite independently on the same territory for almost two millennia (from the twelfth century BC until the sixth century AD). Since the 1970s and 1980s many Georgian scholars have presented this version of the history of Colchis as an incontrovertible truth, a view that has even found its advocates in modern science fiction (Smith et al. 1998, 54).

On the other hand, there is another part of the process of Georgian history making in relation to the two ethnic groups, Abkhazians and Ossetians. Georgian mythology about Abkhazia claims that Abkhazia was historically merely a part of Georgia and in the first millennium B.C.E. was part of ancient Colchis. Georgians also see the Abkhazian kingdom that united Georgia in the 11th century as a Georgian kingdom. Hence, Georgian scholars argue that the Abkhazian kings were Georgians, culturally and politically speaking. The more extreme version of this mythology claims that the ancient Abkhazians were actually a Georgian tribe, and that the ancestors of the contemporary Abkhaz are recent interlopers, arriving in Abkhazia from the North Caucasus only in the seventeenth century (Kaufman 2001, 92). It should be said that, of course, the Georgian and Abkhazian languages are different; the Georgian language belongs to the South Caucasian or Kartvelian language family, and the Abkhazian language belongs to the Northwestern Caucasian language family (Hewitt 2014). However, in recent decades Georgian historians have argued that the ancient population of Colchis, including what is now called Abkhazia, is made up entirely of Georgian tribes. However, by the 1980s the ethnocentric version became the dominant one in school curricula and in the Georgian mass media. It was first explicitly formulated by the Georgian philologist Pavle Ingorokva, and then developed by historians such as Mikeladze, who went so far as to argue that only Colchians lived in Dioscurias and on the Black Sea coast in the distant past. The contemporary Georgian historian Marika Lordkipanidze also has argued that only the Georgians were the autochthonous inhabitants of Colchis, and that the ancestors of modern Abkhazians arrived much later. In her view, one must distinguish between the local ancient Abkhazians and Apsua who arrived later and gave roots to the modern Abkhazians. She believes that the ancestors of the modern Abkhazians were backward highlanders who reached Abkhazia only in the seventeenth century.

With these arguments, she presents the Georgians as not only the original autochthonous population in Abkhazia, but also the dominant majority from time immemorial (Smith et al. 1998, 55).

In contrast, Abkhazian writers and historians have interpreted these actions in association with the central government's policy of homogenization. According to Abkhazian authors the ancestors of the Abkhazian peoples were the original inhabitants of the whole of north-east Asia Minor and south-west Transcaucasia. They believe that the Kartvelians who moved to the area much later, pushing the Abkhazian groups to western Transcaucasia (Smith et al. 1998, 55). In general, these narratives are based on introduce yourself through condemnation of others (Georgians) (Khutsishvili 2018). The Abkhazian peoples believe that the beginning of the Georgian history making process in this region dates back to the Stalin's era. They believe that Joseph Stalin and Lavrentiy Beria tried to Georgianization of this region through the emigration of Georgians and the imposition of the Georgian alphabet and schools. In fact, in the 1930s and during the Stalin's rule, the Georgianization process in Georgia was revived by closing the local schools in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. After Stalin, reactions to this issue strengthened the position of minority languages. However, the Cyrillic script was established again in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in .1954Protests against language discrimination in Georgia were repeated in the 1970s and 1980s; but it didn't result. In 1989, for example, the Ossetia Parliament chose the Ossetian language as the official language in South Ossetia and asked for the promotion of the Ossetia status to an autonomous republic. Tbilisi, of course, rejected this request and Moscow ignored it. Therefore, during the Soviet era, the Georgianization process, especially in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, affected on the escalation of

conflicts between these regions and the central government and the occurrence of war in the post-independence years.

Abkhazian and Ossetian researchers, in response to Georgian historical narratives, have also presented different narratives from historical events in recent decades. Abkhazian national mythology starts from the view that the Abkhaz are the aboriginal inhabitants of the area and it traces the Abkhaz linguistic heritage to the Hurrians and Hattians of the Middle East's second and third millennium B.C.E. It identifies Abkhazia's political roots in a series of small principalities that emerged in the first century C.E. and developed into a united Abkhazia in the eighth century. After a brief genuine Abkhazian national period, Abkhazia took control of western Georgia and eventually united all of Georgia. Abkhazian mythology emphasizes that these unifiers of Georgia were an Abkhazian dynasty; even Queen Tamar gave her son Georgii the second name" Lasha "Abkhazian for bright or enlightened. Abkhazian nationalists next emphasize that Abkhazia regained its independence under the Shervashidze dynasty in the seventeenth century, maintaining autonomy until its 1810union with Russia. The next great symbolic event was the Mohajirstvo, for which the standard Soviet estimate is that 32,000of 78,000Abkhaz were expelled in 1877alone following the Abkhaz uprising of that year. One Abkhaz source puts the total number of expulsions over several decades at over .100,000Colonists of other ethnic groups then resettled the best Abkhazian land. The next great tragedy for the Abkhaz followed the Russian Revolution. After the Abkhaz were suppressed in 1918, the Mensheviks instituted a regime of white terror which did not allow any kind of rights to the Abkhaz while pursuing a resettlement policy of importing more ethnic Georgians into Abkhazia. In the Abkhaz telling, Abkhazia was subordinated to Georgia in 1931due to the machinations of Stalin and Lavrentii Beria. Teaching in the Abkhazian language was banned, and forced immigration of Georgians and

other ethnic groups was accelerated (Kaufman 2001, 96-95). Therefore, Abkhazian mythology believes that Abkhazians have been the real inhabitants of this region and have been persecuted by Russians and Georgians for many years. This issue has gradually shaped the Abkhazians attitude towards the Georgians and has affected on escalation of conflicts between the two ethnic groups in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the formation of narratives of Georgian-Abkhazian relations in recent years among the new generation of Abkhazian peoples shows that the narratives are powerful in highlighting the ethnic elements. Today, for young Abkhazians the narrative of victory in the war for independence is an important factor in unification (Khutsishvili 2018). In addition to the young Abkhazians, the existence of popular narratives among Abkhazian women about Georgian-Abkhazian relations, as well as the war between the two ethnic groups, has strengthened the narrative and history making process, especially about post-independence wars (Ziemer 2020). The stories that told by these women emphasize the violence against Abkhazian women and their displacement via the Georgians. These narratives deepen the conflicts between the two ethnic groups and the Abkhazian sense of being victims by Georgians.

On the other hand, the role of historical myths in the Ossetian-Georgian ethnic conflicts has been emphasized by Ossetian authors. Ossetian mythology traces the Ossetians' ancestry to the first Iranian people to reach the Caucasus region, the ancient Scythians. The Ossetians also trace their ancestry among the Sarmatians and the Alan kingdom in the North Caucasus. A pamphlet by Yuri Gogluyti," Foreign Minister "of South Ossetia in the late 1990s, traces the first militarily significant Ossetian presence only to the early seventeenth century. The Ossetians' main point is to emphasize their eighteenth century conflicts with Georgian kings, and their intermittent autonomy from those kings.

Ossetian mythology emphasizes that the name" South Ossetia "dates from this period rather than being a nineteenth-century or Bolshevik invention, as claimed by the Georgians. Ossetians, like the Abkhaz, have negative memories about Menshevik Georgian rule. They especially emphasize the bloody suppression of their 1920rebellion and the Menshevik flag came to be for Ossetians, as for Abkhazians, a symbol of chauvinist Georgian rule (Kaufman 2001, 98-97). Contradictory narratives from history of the Ossetia have also been important point in ethnic conflicts between Georgians and Ossetians. In general, the autonomous republic of South Ossetia was historically created by the Bolsheviks in 1922in the territory of Shida Kartli which was one of the central provinces of Georgia. Georgian writers believe that this gift was given due to Ossetians aids in the war against Georgia's Mensheviks. This narrative is somewhat corresponding with historical facts; because in general, the base tendencies in South Ossetia since the October Revolution was support for Bolsheviks and opposition with Georgian. On the other hand, the Ossetian version from the formation of South Ossetia is that shortly after the Russian Revolution of 1917, the leaders of South Ossetia declared their desire to unite with North Ossetia in Russia. Tbilisi opposed with this matter. Between 1918 and 1921, the Georgian Mensheviks violently suppressed the Ossetian Bolsheviks uprising; however, on April 20, 1922, the autonomous oblast of South Ossetia was formed by Moscow within Georgia (Khansari Fard, Basiri & Yazdani 2019; Hille 2010). In contrast, the Georgian version states that the creation of the South Ossetian Autonomous oblast was an innovation in favor of local secessionists; because this region has never been a distinct administrative unit before; let alone having an independent political personality. On the other hand, Georgian writers also believe that Georgians were the main inhabitants of this region; Whereas the first Ossetian groups entered this region only after the late thirteenth century, and the great Ossetian

communities in Georgia were formed only between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and perhaps a little earlier in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In fact, regarding the Ossetians, David the Builder's relationship with them summarizes much of the Georgian attitude: The Ossetians were a people of the North Caucasus; Georgians had good relations with them; and the Ossetians were subordinate to Georgia. The Ossetians who successfully invaded Georgia in the thirteenth century were expelled in the fourteenth, so the current settlement of Ossetians in Georgia dates only to the early seventeenth or eighteenth century, making the Ossetians newcomers in Georgia (Kaufman 2001, 93).

Ossetian writers, on the other hand, have not accepted these views; thus, several Ossetian historians have therefore been working for several decades in the attempt to deepen the Ossetians' roots in Transcaucasia. This problem was first addressed in late 1950s and early 1960s by Iurii Gagloev, who tried to identify the local Dvals of the pre-Mongol era with the Ossetians. Zakharii Vaneev, one of the founders of Ossetian historiography, also sought to establish linguistic and cultural continuity betweenthe Ossetians and the ancient Iranian-speakers of the Eurasian steppes and attempted to trace the migrations of all these nomads to Transcaucasia in the early Iron Age. Vaneev argued that the ancient Iranians brought a higher culture to the Caucasus. By basing his arguments upon his own interpretation of the personal names mentioned in the classical sources, Vaneev claimed to find Ossetian chiefs amongst the first Georgian and Abkhazian princes. According to Vaneev ,the Ossetians are the direct descendants of Alanian migrants rather than Iranianised natives. Vaneev sought to provide the Ossetians with deeper roots for a sense of their separate identity and a means of overcoming traditional Georgian claims of cultural superiority; but Vaneev's schema, was in obvious contradiction to the Georgian

version of events. Therefore, it was no accident that Vaneev's manuscripts, which began addressing these problems in the early 1960s, were first published in South Ossetia only in the late1980s, after the Georgian authorities had lost control over local scholarship. Undoubtedly, Vaneev's works contributed to the development of thenational idea amongst the South Ossetians, which itself resulted in first the growth of a separatist movement and, finally, in the Georgian-South Ossetian war of 1991-92. These works first rehabilitated the territorial claims of the South Ossetians by insisting on their immemorial roots. Secondly, they reversed traditional stereotypes by arguing that the Ossetians, who had contributed much to the development of Caucasian culture and the formation of many local peoples, were the true elder brothers to the Georgians. Thirdly, they purported to prove that the Alans-Ossetians had enjoyed their own statehood even earlier than the Georgians. Lastly, it was argued that the Ossetians were the direct descendants of ancient Iranian-speakers rather than simply Iranianised natives. Vaneev's arguments have been picked up and developed by other South Ossetian authors in recent years (Smith et al. 1998, 60-61). The main focus of these writers during these years has been on the existence of Alanian independent state in this region, which has been done in order to legitimize the Ossetians political and territorial rights against similar claims by their neighbors. In fact, these views have been used by Ossets as a defensive tool in confronting with the Tbilisi and their neighbors 'aggressive actions and claims. Therefore, in ethnic tensions between Georgia with Abkhazia and south Ossetia, myth-making and the creation of historical narratives by elites have been an important tool for ethnic identity and an important factor in escalation historical conflicts between these ethnic groups. These historical narratives, over time, have formed the collective memory of these rival ethnic groups. Therefore, the impact of the historical narratives and collective memory in examining ethnic conflicts in the South Caucasus has

been undeniable. The future process of these conflicts and their resolution or intensification is largely dependent on this matter.

Conclusion

Myths and narratives from historical events gradually form the collective memory of ethnic and national groups. This plays an important role in the identity construction and nation-building process of ethnic groups. However, these tools sometimes implement their tasks negatively and reactively. In examining the impact of historical memory on the process of ethnic and national identity construction, instrumentalist researchers believe that the important part of the historical narratives are formed by elites in relation to other ethnic groups or nations selectively and in order to ethnic mobilization. This has been particularly among ethnic groups that had historical conflicts with each other and their own narratives of historical events. Therefore, in examining the process of historical conflicts as well as analyzing the current and future process of these conflicts, the contradictory historical narratives factor is very instructive. In this paper, was attempted to examine this hypothesis in relation to important conflicts in the South Caucasus region. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus region has faced numerous ethnic conflicts. Over the years, a number of these conflicts have unsolved and have remained frozen. Regardless of the impact of many factors

on these conflicts, the role of historical memory that has formed and developed over the years among the region's ethnic groups against others, especially rival ethnic groups, and has used been in the nationalist clashes era by national and ethnic elites, has been very influential. In the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the historical memory of each of these ethnic groups have influenced on the escalation of conflicts in recent decades. Researchers believe that the historical memory of ethnic and national groups forms over time and gradually becomes inflexible and invariable and often manipulated by elites in order to nationalist goals. Therefore, the future process of ethnic conflicts in regions with multiple and rival ethnic groups- such as the South Caucasus region- in large extent depends on reform and change of historical attitudes arising from collective memory and using from the common points that have formed the coexistence context of these ethnic groups over the years.

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