

Hey Hamida,

My name is Diana and I am from Yerevan. I was actually wondering what kind of letter I would get, and I was really excited to read yours.

I would like to share my thoughts first. You're right that you're writing from the other side, whom we are used to seeing as an enemy. However, I want to tell you that I have never considered Azerbaijani people as enemies; maybe a neighbor with whom we are in not that good relations, but not as an enemy. Probably, this is connected with the fact that no member of my family has served in the armed forces, and I don't have personal stories connected to military or loss. This made me always wonder what the perspective of the people from the other side of the border is. Our collective thinking has made us hate each other, but the example of the ethnically Armenian Azerbaijani writer that you show in your letter illustrates how hate and the sense of distinction are instilled in us from childhood. We have marked borders not only between our territories and people, but also cultures, mentality, and traditions. But it is not right.

I want to share my first experience of meeting Azerbaijani people in Ukraine during an international project. We were supposed to introduce our culture, our food and dances. I was amazed at the fact that we have so much in common in terms of songs, food, and even how we dance. Finally, we have found out that both Azerbaijani and Armenian people prepared the same song for the introduction "Sari aghjik", or "Sari Gelin", as you call it. At that moment we just united our cultures in one and called our evening "Armenian–Azerbaijani cultural night". I felt warmth and excitement singing the same song in both languages.

I believe if we concentrate more on our similarities rather than differences we will be able to hear each other, and will eventually create a platform for dialogue. Of course, I am not naïve; I understand that both our nations have grievances towards each other for a number of acts that our ancestors committed, and it's true that there will always be extreme people who will try to restart military actions at their own benefit, but we

– the young people advocating youth – need to be those who understand the destructive consequences of war, and do everything to prevent it.

I want to tell you that there are more young people in Armenia who see the transformation of this conflict only in dialogue and negotiation. I believe it's the same in Azerbaijan as we are writing to each other now. It's not impossible. It already happened. I was very inspired by the story that I am reading now. The book is about the time when, in the second half of the 1980s – with the beginning of the Armenian–Azerbaijani military escalation in Nagorno–Karabakh – Azerbaijani residents of Kyzyl–Shafag (a village in northern Armenia) and Armenian residents of Kerkenj (a village in central Azerbaijan) met through their own initiative to negotiate a peaceful exchange of their villages. This story is apolitical for me; it's a story about people who understood how to take responsibility into their own hands without sacrifices.

While our governments count and brag about how many victims there are on the other side of the border, the two nations are trapped in constant sense of fear, loss, and pain.

We are carriers of our history, but we are also the creators of the new one, and I believe that we are the change that our societies desperately need.

P.S. If you also want to read the book, or to learn more about the peaceful exchange of villages, it is called, “Beyond the Karabakh Conflict: The Story of Village Exchange”, which is a result of cooperation between Armenian–Azerbaijani researchers.

Sincerely yours,

Diana