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Cultural Projects as a Mechanism for Preserving the Karabakh Agenda

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Introduction

Following the end of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, both countries faced a task significantly more complex than reaching interstate agreements. This involves a gradual transition from a conflict-based model of public consciousness toward accepting the existing states, borders, and neighbourly relations as a long-term political reality. It is precisely in this context that the intensification in Armenia, after 2023, of cultural, youth, and public projects associated with Karabakh Armenians deserves attention. At first glance, such initiatives are predominantly cultural in nature: the revival of choirs and theatres, the organisation of concerts, the preservation of dialect and folklore, the creation of digital archives, and work with children. However, an analysis of the content of specific events shows that, in some cases, the cultural component is combined with an entirely different conceptual framework: the idea of a future “return,” the preservation of the symbols of former Karabakh structures, the perception that the Karabakh issue remains unresolved, and the transmission of these attitudes to the next generation. This is where the main problem arises. Even after the formal conclusion of a territorial conflict, a social infrastructure may continue to exist that reproduces the perception that the established territorial and political reality is not final. Moreover, this is not about a single event or a single organisation. What matters is the repetition of the same elements across different projects.

Cultural Events

An analysis of open Armenian sources and sources affiliated with Armenian organisations shows that, between January and September 2026, the activities of groups that had previously operated in Karabakh were not episodic in nature. Concerts, theatrical performances, youth programmes, and presentations in which the preservation of Karabakh identity was accompanied by explicit references to a future “return” were held throughout almost the entire period. A significant proportion of these events took place in Yerevan at well-known cultural venues, including institutions with state or national status. Particularly significant is the fact that some of these events involved children and were held at institutions possessing state or national status.

For example, on 23 January, the first concert since 2023 by the revived children’s and youth ensemble “Children of Artsakh,” entitled “The Call of Artsakh,” was held at the Hovhannes Tumanyan National Puppet Theatre.¹ On 30 June, another concert entitled “Ode to Artsakh” took place at the same theatre. The latter concert concluded with the song “Karabakh, My Beautiful,” which the author of the publication characterised as a call to return to Karabakh. In the context of the theme

¹ https://dialogorg.ru/events/golos_armenii- pesnya- stavshaya molitvoy/

of “return,” the event had a pronounced political and symbolic undertone. Through songs, staged episodes, objects of traditional everyday life, and memories of life there, an image was constructed of a “lost” homeland and the necessity of returning. The author of the article explicitly writes that the concert prompted the audience to “think again about returning home,” while the final song, “Karabakh, My Beautiful,” was interpreted by the author as a “demand and an order to return to Armenian Artsakh.” Thus, the theme of return was incorporated directly into a children’s cultural programme.²

On 5 February, the first concert of the revived “Vararakn” choir was held at the Komitas Chamber Music House,³ while on 9 September the choir presented a programme entitled “Singing Artsakh.” The ensemble’s director, Zakar Keshishyan, stated that he believed in a future return to Karabakh, and the concert concluded with a performance of the “anthem” of the previously dissolved unrecognised regime.⁴ This episode is of particular significance. An anthem is no longer simply an element of folklore. It is a political symbol. On 12 September, the choir performed at the Aram Khachaturian House-Museum.⁵

On 13 September, the “Artsakh” Jazz Orchestra, which had been regarded as a “state” ensemble, performed at the Komitas Chamber Music House. The programme included an original composition by the ensemble’s director, Tigran Suchyan, entitled “Return.” The concert was organised by the NGO “DIALOG” and the National Centre of Chamber Music of Armenia.⁶

A separate aspect of this process has been work with young people connected with the revived “Stepanakert” theatre. On 11 June, the results of the first academic year of a special theatre programme were presented. As a result, fourteen young people originating from Karabakh completed their first year of study at the Galya Novents Acting School. Speaking at the event, theatre director Ruzan Khachatryan noted that, for the students of the Galya Novents School’s “Artsakh” theatre course, the year had represented a genuine entry into the world of theatre. At the end, she emphasised that although they were not physically in “Artsakh,” they remembered “Artsakh” and did everything for “Artsakh.” The participants themselves also shared their impressions. According to one of the students, Shoger: “It seemed that many hopes had been lost, but the theatre helped us believe in the future. We dream of gathering together again and continuing our studies, and one day performing a play on a stage

² <https://www.aravot.am/2026/07/01/1566527/>

³ https://westernarmeniatv.com/ru/culture_ru/%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B7%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B6%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5-%D1%85%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BD-%D1%83%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BB/

⁴ <https://golosarmenii.am/%D0%A1-%D0%9D%D0%90%D0%94%D0%95%D0%96%D0%94%D0%9E%D0%99-%D0%9D%D0%90-%D0%92%D0%9E%D0%97%D0%92%D0%A0%D0%90%D0%A9%D0%95%D0%9D%D0%98%D0%95-%D0%98-%D0%A1-%D0%93%D0%98%D0%9C%D0%9D%D0%9E%D0%9C-%D0%90%D0%A0/>

⁵ <https://www.aravot.am/2026/09/13/1579671/>

⁶ <https://www.aravot.am/2026/09/14/1579739/>

in 'Artsakh'.”⁷ On 29 June, the theatre presented the performance “Ruzan. Daughter of Artsakh” on the stage of the Hamazgayin Theatre in Yerevan. The presentation was accompanied by the terminology of “revival.” Against the backdrop of themes of patriotism and the struggle for freedom, the heroic image and self-sacrifice of the young Armenian princess Ruzan were presented.⁸

Alongside concerts, theatrical performances, and children’s programmes, a digital infrastructure for preserving “Karabakh identity” is also being developed. Thus, on 15 September, the “Digital House of Culture of Artsakh” was presented in Yerevan. The project was created at the initiative of the “We and Our Mountains” agency, founded by Ruben Vardanyan, with the support of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The stated objective of the project is particularly indicative. Its director, Narine Aghabalyan, emphasises that Karabakh should be present in the digital space not as a completed chapter of the past, but as a “living culture.” A member of the project’s academic group, Lernik Hovhannisyan, formulated the objective even more explicitly, stating that the platform should ensure the permanent presence of the Karabakh theme so that the “page” devoted to it “would never be closed.”⁹

Put together, these episodes demonstrate that the theme of “return” is a refashioned territorial claim, which is reproduced through music, children’s programmes, symbolism, and cultural events. Images of home, lost territory, and war form a unified emotional and conceptual framework. As a result, such activity goes beyond musical or cultural education and becomes one of the mechanisms for shaping collective memory and the perceptions of the new generation regarding the past and the future.

State-Linked Venues

Particular attention should be paid to the fact that such events are not held exclusively on the premises of public organisations or private cultural centres. In several cases, the venues were institutions directly connected with the Armenian state. One example is the Hovhannes Tumanyan National Puppet Theatre. In 2023, by decision of the Armenian government, the theatre was granted “National” status. The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Armenia officially describes it as a state theatre. The Komitas Chamber Music House is part of the National Centre of Chamber Music. The National Centre itself was established by a decision of the Armenian government in 2010. The Aram Khachaturian House-Museum has the status of a state non-commercial organisation and is part of the system of cultural institutions receiving state funding through the relevant ministry. The Sos Sargsyan Hamazgayin State Theatre is likewise a state institution. All of this is confirmed by

⁷ https://dialogorg.ru/events/artsakhskiy_teatralnyy_kurs_shkoly_-gali_novents-_podvyei_itogi_pervogo_goda_obucheniya/

⁸ https://dialogorg.ru/events/artsakhskiy_teatr_predstavit_na_erevanskoy_stsene_istoricheskuyu_dramu_muratsana/

⁹ <https://www.aravot.am/2026/09/15/1580031/>

documents of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Armenia.¹⁰ Consequently, the issue is no longer exclusively societal in nature. This raises the question of how such narratives interact with state cultural infrastructure.

The State's Position

At the same time, it would be incorrect to automatically conclude that the holding of such events means that the Armenian government supports their political content. The materials examined provide no evidence of the existence of a state programme promoting the Karabakh agenda through cultural events. Moreover, the official position of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is directly opposed to this idea. On 8 August, Pashinyan stated that, in order to make peace irreversible, Armenia must end discussions about the “right of return of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh.”

¹¹ According to Pashinyan, such narratives contradict the right of future generations to peaceful coexistence. On 24 August, the Prime Minister reiterated this position during a discussion of the government programme for 2026-2031. He stated that peace must be consolidated not only politically but also at the socio-psychological level, and once again called for an end to discussions of return on both sides.¹² Thus, a significant internal contradiction emerges. At the level of the highest political authority, it is asserted that the Karabakh agenda must be abandoned for the sake of long-term peace. At the same time, events at which this theme continues to be present are being held within cultural infrastructure linked to the state. This is arguably one of the most important issues for analysis. If state institutions, despite such statements by the authorities, remain open venues for this kind of discourse, a situation of institutional duality emerges. This does not necessarily imply deliberate support. However, it may contribute to the normalisation of the corresponding ideas.

Diaspora Resources

External support connected with preserving the agenda of the Karabakh Armenians also deserves separate attention. It relies on the resources of the Armenian diaspora in the United States, Russia, and other countries. For example, a concert by the “Varanda” children’s and youth choir was financed by the Eastern Prelacy of the Cilician Catholicosate in the United States and an Armenian church structure in New York.¹³ A particularly prominent role is played by the Moscow-based public organisation “DIALOG.”¹⁴ Following 2023, the organisation became one of the sources of organisational and financial support for a number of Karabakh Armenian groups revived in Armenia. In its own report, “DIALOG” states that it provided assistance to the “Stepanakert Vahram Papazyan Drama Theatre,” the “Children of Artsakh” ensemble, the “Vararakn” choir, the “Dizak Art” centre, the “Kirs”

¹⁰ <https://escs.gov.am/>

¹¹ <https://www.primeminister.am/ru/statements-and-messages/item/2026/08/08/Nikol-Pashinyan-messag>

¹² <https://www.primeminister.am/ru/statements-and-messages/item/2026/08/24/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech>

¹³ <https://www.aravot.am/2026/09/10/1578986/>

¹⁴ <https://dialogorg.ru/news/18.11.2025%20-jcbuhcchjgw/>

foundation, and other organisations. Thus, this concerns more than financial support for an individual concert or theatrical performance. An organisational support infrastructure can be observed in this area, making it possible to revive ensembles, sustain their activities, connect them with one another, and create conditions for their continued operation after 2023. In particular, the organisation itself describes its support for the “Children of Artsakh” ensemble and the “Vararakn” choir as systematic. This circumstance is important for assessing long-term processes.

The Main Risk

For the South Caucasus, the problem lies not so much in the existence of differing historical interpretations of the past. These will inevitably persist for a long time. A more serious risk is the intergenerational reproduction of an “unfinished” territorial conflict. A peace agreement can change relations between states. However, it does not automatically change the system of collective perceptions. If children grow up with the conviction that the existing political reality is only temporary, while the historical objective remains a return to territory belonging to a neighbouring state, the possibility arises that a latent conflict will persist. Today, it may manifest itself exclusively through cultural forms. Fifteen or twenty years from now, it may acquire political expression. This does not necessarily mean war. It may take the form of political mobilisation around a territorial issue, the emergence of parties and movements built around demands to revise the existing order, resistance to the normalisation of relations, or pressure on governments attempting to develop regional cooperation. As a result, a classic process of radicalisation may emerge. Any rhetoric from one side may be used by radical groups on the other side as evidence that compromise is impossible. The reaction of the second side then becomes a justification for the first. The cycle subsequently begins to reproduce itself.

Conclusion

Therefore, the central issue in these processes is not the preservation of the culture of the Karabakh Armenians itself. The question is different: after the end of the conflict, can cultural infrastructure become a mechanism for preserving the political perception that the conflict remains “unfinished”? The answer is clearly yes. If peace is consolidated through agreements, while at the same time new generations continue to be socialised through narratives of an “unfinished” territorial issue, the region may experience a prolonged period of external stability while retaining an underlying potential for conflict. Therefore, the long-term stability of the South Caucasus will depend not only on whether Armenia and Azerbaijan sign the necessary documents. Another question is no less important: whether peace becomes part of the political culture and public consciousness of the next generation, or whether the conflict continues to exist within that culture in a symbolically preserved form.

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