

Speaking Peace to Power

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Academic freedom is crucial to peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan

“Long live the brotherhood of the Azerbaijani and Armenian nations!” This is not something you hear very often in Azerbaijan, a country that has been in a state of war with Armenia ever since regaining its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Yet these were the words that a young scholar, Bahruz Samadov, chose to communicate to the world in January 2025 as he was bundled from pre-trial detention to hearing at a local court in the Azerbaijani capital, Baku.

Samadov, a promising young doctoral researcher at Charles University in Prague, was arrested in August 2024, on charges of high treason related to his contacts with Armenian peace activists and analysts. Samadov had been a vocal advocate of both dialogue between the two peoples and of critical perspectives on the history of the conflict between them. His lucid English-language analysis made him a regular guest on panels and podcasts about the South Caucasus.

If convicted, Samadov could be sentenced to up to 20 years in prison. His case has been taken up by international human rights networks such as [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#) and the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#). Several European [universities](#) have expressed their concern and scholars have issued [petitions](#) calling for his release. He is one of several scholars currently imprisoned or living under house arrest in Azerbaijan, although he is the only one facing charges of treason related to his contacts with Armenians.

Samadov’s arrest, and his call to peace, are riddled with ironies. Armenia and Azerbaijan have been engaged in detailed negotiations on a normalization agreement over the last year,

after Azerbaijan's military take-over of Nagorno-Karabakh, the territory at the heart of the conflict, in September 2023. The region's entire Armenian population was displaced as a result, and now live as refugees in Armenia. Despite this forceful end to the long-running conflict, both sides have highlighted that agreement is within reach. On 13 March 2025, Armenia and Azerbaijan [announced](#) separately that negotiations on a peace deal have been concluded and the sides have finalised a treaty text. This follows months of diplomatic boosterism, as Azerbaijani diplomats have [exhorted](#) international audiences to drop the 'doom and gloom' narrative about the prospects for peace. Samadov's appeal to brotherhood among the previously warring nations would appear to line up perfectly with the Armenian-Azerbaijani *Zeitenwende*. Why, then, has an outspoken peace advocate been arrested just as peace appears to be within reach?

Military victory has unfortunately not resulted in any relaxation of the deeper tensions between the two countries. A central pillar in those tensions is a [historiographic edifice](#) that sustains narratives of essential, unchanging enmity between the two nations. Unlike the winners and losers of World War II in Europe, there is no consensual memory on the causes, events and consequences of the various wars that Armenians and Azerbaijanis have fought against one another. For decades a heady mix of nationalist story-telling, conspiracy theories, denialism and 'alternative facts' has stood in the way of the reckonings with history that any transformation of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations needs.

In Armenia, military defeat at the hands of Azerbaijan in 2020 forced a reckoning with that mix. Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has publicly [renounced](#) irredentism and dreams of restoring a 'historical Armenia', to assert instead what he calls '[Real Armenia](#)' based on the country's internationally recognized borders. In Azerbaijan, victory has had the paradoxical effect of driving a new state-enforced [unanimity](#) around the persistence of conflict despite Azerbaijan's

resounding victory and take-over of Nagorno-Karabakh. In a post-war crackdown, independent voices in the media, civil society, and academia have been silenced. Far from encouraging a thousand flowers to bloom, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has chastised young people participating in Azerbaijani-Armenian dialogue meetings, calling them agents of foreign powers and traitors who forgot national wounds. In spite of the timid announcement that a normalization treaty text is complete, [threats of a new war](#) have not stopped, and Azerbaijani authorities continue their militaristic announcements. Samadov's call to peace disrupts this hardening of a new, post-war narrative on the eternity of Armenian-Azerbaijani antagonism that serves authoritarian power.

The situation for academic freedom in Azerbaijan is hardly atypical. [According](#) to Scholars at Risk, a world movement which defends scholars under threat, in 2024-25 113 scholars worldwide were killed, disappeared or faced violence, 73 were imprisoned, 21 were prosecuted and 54 lost their positions. In authoritarian contexts scholars writing on political issues face suppression and exile. Some Western universities have faced [accusations](#) of suppressing researchers on social issues such as gender-critical perspectives. The academe everywhere faces problems of financing, censorship and infiltration – particularly through non-transparent funding – by political interest.

In the context of the long-deferred prospects for peace, however, Samadov's case has a specific resonance. The freedom to reappraise the narratives of eternal enmity between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, to contextualize conflict as a product of specific historical circumstances rather than innate characteristics and to build new relations on a different basis is essential for peace. Without a critical overhaul of the narratives that have sustained conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, any agreement between them is – regardless of diplomatic boosterism – doomed. Samadov's call to peace is a call to a different future, and it needs to be

heard.