

Diaspora Returnees, Transfer of Knowledge and a New Understanding of “Homeland”

By Anna Harutyunyan, Berlin

Abstract

Armenians living in the diaspora often had a picture of Armenia that did not correspond to the reality on the ground. Returning to the real Armenia shatters these images. Now these returnees are transferring their educational and cultural capital to Armenia, seeking to bring real change to a country with a (post-) Soviet heritage and little experience of statehood.

Introduction: “Returning” to the Homeland

In July 2010 I started my field research trip to Armenia. That was the first time I flew to my own country for work and not for summer vacation, as I had in previous years. Going to Armenia for work as a German University research fellow incited strange feelings of being in-between different worlds: being connected with Armenia and being away from Armenia; knowing Armenia, but going to re-discover Armenia.

While boarding the Berlin–Yerevan flight of Armenian Airlines, I kept remembering the Facebook status of one of my diaspora friends who now lived in Yerevan: “If you want to know what’s going on in Armenia, you need TO LIVE in Armenia for a minimum of 5 years. Not everything is pink like my balcony.” I had not been in Armenia for five years and now was on the way to Yerevan for a 2.5-month field trip to study the new “pink balconies” of my city.

Unlike many Armenia Armenians (among them my own family) who emigrated from the country in the beginning of 1990s for a better life, a number of diaspora Armenians started visiting Armenia to discover their homeland and some of them also made the choice to settle there. True, for many of them Armenia was nevertheless not the homeland they had imagined when they lived in the diaspora. The post-Soviet Armenia was not a place where they would connect with their family memories and identity aspirations.

However, diaspora Armenians’ detachment from the idea of the Republic of Armenia as their “ancestral homeland” had more fertile soil than simply the Cold War between the Soviet Union (of which Armenia was a part) and the rest of the world. In many interviews I conducted in the diaspora communities, different Armenians described various images of the homeland and the place of Armenia within their particular imaginative map. For many the post-socialist Republic of Armenia has come to represent a formal, non-intimate, and non-emotional homeland, which has little in common with their sense of “home”. Meanwhile, for many, a real emotional attachment still persists with the respective countries of their life before migration (Turkey, Leba-

non, Iran, Syria, etc.). This is where they were born and raised and whose cultural identity they inherited and passed to the next generations.

On the other hand, for many others, the connotation of “ancestral homeland” was long connected with the lands which their forefathers had left during the traumatic exodus. For many diaspora generations the image of the homeland was the symbolic “Armenia, lands of paradise,” which constituted the Anatolian part of today’s Turkey. Sure, behind that image there always has been an everlasting longing for the homeland and a continuous desire to return to the lost lands and once again be a part of them. Diasporan identity and the collective (hi)story of their ethnic group have been constructed on the memory and commemoration of violence and trauma. The central and most important constitutive element of that identity had come to be the genocide remembrance in the families, commemoration practices within diaspora communities, and the political agenda of its recognition.

However, the growing visibility of the post-Soviet, independent Armenian Republic has played a decentralizing role in the mental map of the “homeland”, remaking it from one that is symbolic, imaginative and idealized into one that is more tangible and realistic.

In her film “Stone, Touch, Time” Garine Torosian tears down the wall constructed between the unreal imagined homeland and real existing “Hayastan” (Armenia) by introducing narratives of three Armenian diasporan women’s identity. The film-maker aims at showing the real image of Armenia: she enters its reality, discovers it, understands it, but then leaves it behind. The film echoes with the stories of my diaspora interviewees back in Berlin and other communities on the perception of post-Soviet Armenia as the homeland: “dreaming about your homeland as a diasporan is like being in love with someone you still don’t know. You play with your imagination, you cherish it, you can control it. When we saw Armenia, we got to know it. There was no space left for imagination and that was the hardest part... to face the reality. We are happy it exists,

but it is not our reality” [BG, Turkish Armenian, Berlin, September 2008].

This article is about those who have torn up their imaginative pictures of Armenia as the homeland, those who not only entered Armenia’s reality, but also have become a part of that reality, started changing its cultural content, as well as changing the main diasporan discourse on what the homeland ultimately should mean. The focus group for this analysis are middle-aged professionals who moved to Armenia from a wide geography of Diaspora communities (USA, Canada, Western Europe and Middle Eastern countries) to settle permanently and initiated a broad range of activities, from business investments to voluntary public work.

“Not Everything is Pink like my Balcony”

Clashes and strategies of adaptation

I went to see Raffi, one of my interviewees who moved with his family from Canada to Armenia almost nine years ago, in his office in downtown Yerevan. We started our conversation talking about the Armenian government’s new initiative encouraging mass labor immigration to Russia. “They (Russians) are openly saying ‘Come!’”. But, should OUR government support this idea? I keep thinking of what is going to happen in the end and it makes me deeply sad.” Indeed the government’s support for labor migration from Armenia to Russia has been confusing for returning diasporans.

In fact, moving to and living in Armenia causes numerous instances of confusion for returnees. The first thing the diaspora Armenians face is the question of legitimacy. “We come to Armenia with the knowledge we gained in our countries. We try to use our knowledge, but often it does not correspond to the local laws and we get stuck in-between what we know and what we can do”. This question of legitimacy poses a dilemma for the returnees in how to deal with the situation. Many of the interviewees mentioned that life in Armenia requires ingenuity. “You have to be creative and to know how to maneuver”, while also trying to remain within the confines of the law and working professionally without relying on local “brotherhood” connections to get ahead.

Diasporan (trans-)cultural capital vs. a homogeneous homeland

For returning diasporans using knowledge and professional skills acquired abroad often results in clashes with local actors in a variety of fields. As some of them told me, this is a clash between knowledge and so called “non-knowledge”, between cosmopolitan and global thinking, which is based on a universal understanding of democracy and human rights, and local actors’ complete lack of comprehension of those concepts. In Raffi’s opinion

this divergence ultimately derives from the experiences of statehood of those countries where the returnees come from (mostly the USA, Canada and Western Europe) and Armenia’s lack of a similar experience. “Armenia has only 20 years of life experience and you can never compare that with the way that Canada as a state developed over the last century”.

On the other hand, since they were raised in multicultural societies and surrounded by a multiplicity of backgrounds, identities and practices, the repatriated Armenians think the cause of divergence and conflict between global and local knowledge lies in Armenia’s homogeneity. “The more we (those living in Armenia) socialize, communicate and mix with foreigners, the better it would be for Armenia’s modernization”, according to a diasporan owner of a disco bar in Yerevan that is popular with both diaspora and local youth.

The (trans)cultural capital of the diaspora Armenians is pivotal for Armenia’s modernization. The transfer of knowledge and the localization of their social, educational, intellectual and professional expertise is much more significant than any financial asset invested into the modernization of the new homeland.

The flow of diasporic individual and institutional investors started after the independence of the republic in the 1990s. Numerous studies have been conducted on Armenia analyzing the diaspora relationship from the perspective of diaspora institutional and individual financial investment for economic and social improvement. However, little attention has been paid to the role of non-financial assets in the form of knowledge, life experiences and professional skills contributed by the diasporan repatriates.

Emergence of A New Discourse

A new understanding of each other’s role and Armenia’s modernization

The fields of activity where diaspora repatriates are represented cover a wide range, starting from social/ volunteer work (e.g. in the field of disabled or orphan children, women’s issues, gender equality, etc.) to the business or legal sphere (e.g. entertainment management, the nightclub business, legal consulting, etc.). What unites all those different actors and makes them important for this short article is the necessity of a new discourse to be initiated both by the diaspora and homeland Armenians and which should become a joint strategy for Armenia’s modernization. According to the repatriates, the new discourse should be based on more than just the past and the memory of trauma and violence, which used to be a main constitutive bridging element between the homeland and diaspora for decades. A new discourse should be based instead on the re-conceptualization of

the meaning of diaspora for Armenia and vice versa, the role of Armenia for the diasporic communities. The new mutual re-conceptualization should include an understanding of local needs for democratization and modernization, on one hand, and the transfer of knowledge by the diaspora professionals to the locals, on the other.

From the politics of memory to the politics of active citizens

A considerable amount of the research on the Armenian diaspora has dealt with diaspora memory politics in Armenia, focusing on the ritualized and materialized representations of memory both in the diaspora and the homeland. In the meantime, besides the topic of genocide memory politics, the repatriates I have interviewed increasingly discuss how the diaspora could contribute to the politics of active citizenship and professional development.

Back in Raffi's office, I asked him to list the priority issues. "So, let's include genocide recognition, Armenia's economy, civil society, human rights, governance, the Karabakh issue, Armenia–diaspora relations... and let us prioritize. Now, as someone living in Armenia, I would place Armenia's statehood, as the primary priority issue. If there is no good governance, no civil society, if there is no Armenian state, what are we talking about? ... During my childhood we were taught patriotic songs about independent Armenia as a dream country. The independence came too fast. We all did not expect it to happen so quickly. After singing all those songs, when the time came for action, what have we done after all? What we (both in the diaspora and in Armenia) did, led us to today's situation..." In Raffi's words, the core of the new discourse should be to stimulate the emer-

gence of active citizens. They should become the leadership of the new Armenian state.

Conclusion: Modernization through Transfer of Knowledge

Last year I often conducted my field research by hanging out in a disco bar called "That Place." Surprisingly, in spite of the typically loud music and dancing crowd, I could always manage to find a good companion for conversation. The bar in downtown Yerevan, which attracts locals, diasporans and tourists, is owned by active Diasporans who moved from Dubai to Armenia several years ago. The owners sought to help the country modernize by bringing their own expertise and cultural influence into the entertainment business. "Soviet thinking is still in the heads of people, but look at this dancing crowd. These people represent the new generation, which is open-minded, different, flexible and more receptive to the new ["western"] methods of communication and life styles." one of the frequent diasporan visitors to the bar told me.

Be it through entertainment management or legal consulting, whether in English language classrooms, the Women's Center or on Facebook walls, diaspora repatriates are creating spaces for transferring their global knowledge or, in Bourdieu's words, their cultural capital to the local compatriots and believe that that is the way to develop a new pool of creative citizens. By transferring their cultural capital to locals, they not only change their own view of what the new homeland should mean now, but also change the perception of the local Armenians towards the role of the diaspora from passive outside observer to active local participant.

About the Author

Anna Harutyunyan is a research fellow at the Institute of European Ethnology, Humboldt University, Berlin.