

Ethnic return of Armenian Americans: Perspectives

Karolina Pawłowska

University of Adam Mickiewicz in Poznań, karolina.pavlovska@gmail.com

Abstract

The field research conducted among the very few Armenian Americans who have moved to Armenia showed that the phenomena of migration of the diaspora of Armenians to Armenia holds great potential both as a theoretical issue within migration studies and potentially a social phenomenon, as Armenian Americans differ from other migrants and expats in Armenia, because they carry stereotyped pre-images of that land that influence their expectations toward their future lives there. Field research conducted in Armenia in 2012 shows that the disillusionment that repatriation brings causes internal tensions and identity crises, eventually forcing migrants to redefine their role in Armenia in the framework of their contribution to the development of their homeland, often isolating them from local Armenians through diaspora practices and maintaining the symbolic boundary between these two groups of Armenians in Armenia.

KEYWORDS: diaspora, ethnic return, symbolic boundary, boundary maintenance, sojourners

Introduction

Both *diaspora* and specifically the Armenian diaspora are topics well explored in literature (Cohen 2008; Dufoix 2008; Bauböck & Faist 2010; Tölölyan 2012). However, the migration of Armenians from the diaspora to Armenia is not a popular topic among researchers and the diaspora of Armenians themselves. The number of papers published on it is still much lower than those focused on the history or presence of Armenian diaspora in host countries worldwide. The estimated population of Armenian Americans in Armenia is 350 people,¹ a significantly low number taking into account that there are about 700,000 people of Armenian ancestry living in the US.² Nevertheless, the field research conducted among very few Armenian Americans who moved to Armenia showed that this phenomenon holds great potential both as a theoretical issue within migration studies and as a key study of a social process of boundary maintenance and redefinition.

¹ These are own estimations done during the fieldwork, based on interviews with repatriates and analysts based in Armenia.

² According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2010 there were almost 500,000 Americans who claimed to have full or partial Armenian ancestry (US Census Bureau); however, some sources report a much higher number, up to 1 million people (Shain 1999). It is certain that the Armenian diaspora in the USA is the second largest

The following paper briefly outlines the main focuses and conclusions of the qualitative field research conducted during the 18 months of my residency in Yerevan in 2013–2014. Using snowball sampling, I managed to approach and interview, with the use of unstructured, in-depth interviews, 30 individuals of varied age and gender who were born in the USA as second-, third-, and fourth³ generation migrants who had moved to Armenia since its independence in 1991.

I mostly explored the issues of their reasons for moving, comments and concerns regarding their lives in Armenia and repatriates' perception of their own future and their role in the new country of residence. Giving a space for a declarative sphere of migrants' views and interpretations I intended to access the way they frame their own repatriation experience, it's reasons, course, purpose and how they perceive the local Armenians. As a cultural anthropologist, I always put emphasis on the gap between the sphere of declaration and self-perception and the field of social practices and individual choices. Therefore, I used participant observation, attempting to take part in social and political events that were initiated and/or attended by the repatriates.

Although the structured research took six months,⁴ the time of observation stretches to the entire period of my residence in Armenia. Being affiliated as a research fellow in the Regional Studies Center, a think-tank based in Yerevan, I had access to the first-hand political analysis of major events that were polarising Armenian society during the time of my residence, such as the commemorations of the Armenian Genocide, the presidential election in 2013, and Armenia joining the Eurasian Customs Union with The Russian Federation.

The research methods applied in the field served the purpose of understanding how and why the symbolic boundary⁵ between Armenian Americans moving to Armenia and local Armenians is maintained⁶ and how this process influences the assimilation⁷ of migrants. They also provided certain insight into the link between the Armenian diaspora and the Republic of Armenia. It is already considered a truism that various obstacles that migrants find in their integration attempts are often the result of a contrast between habits and presumptions acquired in the sending country and the social, political, and cultural realities of the hosting country. This paper briefly outlines my interpretation of the source and substance of this tension and concludes with the predictions of the potential course of further assimilation. It also uses the available scholarship to select appellations which in my opinion are the most adequate in the specific case of the ethnic return of Armenian diaspora. Significantly, the article has the character of a working paper, as I have recently

³ One interview included into the research was conducted with a person who left Soviet Armenia at the age of 8.

⁴ As a structured research I mean the time when the research data (interviews and observations) were collected in a regular and organized way, accompanied with research journal and notes.

⁵ According to Lamont and Molnár, symbolic boundaries are 'conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree up on definitions of reality' (2002: 168).

⁶ Writing about boundary maintenance I am mostly inspired by the iconic paper of Fredrik Barth, the Introduction to the book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (1969).

⁷ Following Eliza Morawska, I understand assimilation as 'the process of integrating migrants and their children into economical, political and social institutions and the culture of multi-segmented hosting society (2009: 10).

moved to Armenia to, after three years of absence, conduct follow-up field research and reconsider the validity and adequacy of the proposed statements.

Armenian homeland(s)

Due to the complex history of Armenian migration, the notion of what can be considered the Armenian homeland becomes adequately complicated and, as Susan Pattie underlines, ‘for centuries there has been no single, clearly defined center and periphery acknowledged by all Armenians’ (1999: 85). What is called Western Armenia comprised six Armenian *vilayetes* in the Ottoman Empire; however in the beginning of the 20th century Armenian communities were also very robust in the Persian Empire and Russian Empire. According to some Armenian historians, what can be called Greater Armenia and the historical homeland of all Armenians includes a much wider territory, not only Western Armenia but also the other lands inhabited by numerous Armenian populations, such as the Georgian province Javakhetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Nakhchivan (today the enclave of Azerbaijan in Armenia), and the contemporary Republic of Armenia (Eastern Armenia) (Adalian 2010: 336–7).

The large-scale Armenian emigration is considered⁸ to have been initiated by the Armenian Genocide in 1915, when thousands of Armenians left Western Armenia escaping state-sponsored massacres initiated by the Young Turks in the collapsing Ottoman Empire (Safrastyan 2011). Consequently, a strong majority of Armenians in diaspora come from the territories of former Ottoman Empire and left them in the first half of the 20th century. Genocide survivors sought refuge in the US, Middle East, Europe and Asia, joining already existing Armenian communities or creating the new ones. Later, political turmoil in countries such as Lebanon, Iran or Iraq forced many Armenians to migrate further, toward North America or Europe. As a result, the histories of Armenians in the diaspora are extremely varied and, in a sense, multi-layered, as is what is considered the homeland (Patti 1999).

Only a minority of Armenians in diaspora consists of Armenians coming from the countries of the South Caucasus (Bakalian 1994). The present Republic of Armenia, that is the current destination of Armenian diaspora, was created mainly in the borders of Armenian *oblasts* (provinces) established within the Russian Empire after the Treaty of Turkmenchay ending the Russo-Persian War in 1828, almost a century before the genocide. The population of these lands, as the subjects of the Russian Empire, had never suffered from genocide, but some Armenians from Western Armenia came to this territory fleeing the acts of violence in the Ottoman Empire.

Contemporary Armenia is not, in the most physical sense, the land of ancestors of a strong majority of Armenian diaspora but a completely different territory. Recognising this gap, while referring to the Republic of Armenia, Sossie Kasbarian introduces the term ‘step-homeland,’ present when ‘two entities that are not related by descent are forced

⁸ Some researchers such as Razmik Panossian or Rouben Paul Adalian would argue that Armenians has always been a diasporic nation (or an ethnic group in pre-modern period), even centuries before the Armenian genocide (Panossian 2006; Adalian 1989).

into a familial relationship by external forces' (2009: 359). The distance mentioned above is not only of geographical, but also symbolical nature, as it refers to what is considered as ancestral and traditional. As some historians underline, even before the final takeover of Eastern Armenia by the Russian Empire, the cultural differences between Eastern and Western lands inhabited by Armenians were wide (Panossian 2006), facilitated by two dialects of the Armenian language, differences in folklore, cultural inspirations, and political agendas. This gap was later deepened by the years of the Iron Curtain, the Sovietisation of the Armenian Republic and the diasporisation of Armenian migrants, who tend to freeze their own culture in the place and time of dispersion and ultimately reduce it to external cultural traits.

As a result, we face the existence, using the terminology of Benedict Anderson (1991), of two imagined communities that use different points of reference to define their own identities, at the same time declaring unity. This unity is underlined by both Armenian diaspora organisations that base their existence and mission on the link between diaspora and the Armenian state, and the state itself, gladly reaching for humanitarian aid and other forms of support (Policy Forum Armenia 2010).⁹ As most definitions of diaspora emphasise, the link to the homeland is the constitutive element of a diaspora itself that always shows some extent of, using the terminology of Appadurai (1996), assimilation resistance to continue to exist as a diaspora. However, it is quite noteworthy that repatriation is not a popular concept among Armenians scattered around the world, who in overwhelming majority seem to be satisfied with channelling their own national sentiments through charity and some forms of political activism provided within the framework of diaspora organisations. Taking into account the fact that there are approximately twice the Armenians in diaspora as there are citizens of Armenia (Pattie 1999), the authors of the report underline that the cooperation between a diaspora and its homeland still leaves much to be desired (Policy Forum Armenia 2010), as it is limited to humanitarian aid and occasional visits, if any.

Theoretical framework

Even though the issue of diaspora is currently one of the most popular topics in social sciences, the specific case of diaspora Armenians moving to Armenia brings the need of rethinking the terms commonly used to name this type of migration, such as "repatriation" or "ancestral return". The former, defined as 'resumption of an individual of the lost nationality' or 'sending back a person or assisting the return of a person to the own country' (Reading 1996: 176), cannot be used to describe the migration of ethnic Armenians to Armenia.

First, the acquisition of lost nationality or, in general terms, the establishments of formal links to the hosting country is not the priority of migrants (Kasbarian 2009). Second, most of the migrants have no links to the Republic of Armenia other than ethnic origin and were not born within its territory.

⁹ Policy Forum Armenia is an independent, non-profit organization providing analysis regarding social, economic and political issues in Armenia (www.pf-armenia.org).

The researchers writing about ancestral return focus mostly on first-generation migrants (see King, Christou, Levitt 2014) for whom labels such as *ancestral* and *return* are relatively clear and seem accurate. It can be questioned if Armenia as the destination country of ethnic Armenians can be labelled as ancestral, taking into account all the differences described above. The migration movement discussed in this paper raises questions regarding the accuracy of the word *return*, which is not a return in the literary sense. Therefore, I would like to use the term *ethnic return* used by Tsuda in his article *Why does the diaspora return home? The causes of ethnic return migration*. The component *ethnic* detaches the word *return* from its literal meaning, which gives this term much more flexibility. King and Christou, discussing the issue of returns which are not returns, decide to:

assert the emic perspective of migrants themselves. If they believe they are returning to a homeland, to which they have an emotional and historical connection, then it is the ontology rather than the statistical measurement of return, which is the overriding criterion (2014: 2).

However, if one attempts to avoid taking the emic perspective of migrants as ultimate, it may open the research field to new questions regarding the tension between what was expected as an “ancestral return”, which assumes a certain continuity, and the real experiences of migration and integration, the tension between familiar and unfamiliar, own and alien.

Questioning the adequacy of the term “repatriation” subsequently challenges the term’s derivatives such as “repatriate” or “returnee”. Sossie Kasbarian proposes the term “sojourner”, which in her opinion is the most accurate to label the specific character of contested migration because ‘sojourning can be a prelude to settlement, an experimental migration over a period of time’ (Kasbarian 2009: 365). This term highlights the transnational dimension of ethnic return to Armenia, as a gradual and dynamic process, characterised by the high mobility of migrants who ‘make an active decision to “return” on their own terms, free to leave when they wish and indeed, to visit home as often as they desire’ ibid. I agree with Kasbarian that the ethnic return of that Armenian diaspora is often experimental and temporary, which makes the term *sojourner* adequate at the current stage of research.

Armenian diaspora: preparing the groundwork

To understand the assimilation practices of Armenian American living in Armenia it is necessary to outline some basic characteristics of the Armenian diaspora that constitute the migrants’ background. What is noteworthy, even though Armenian diaspora is considered post-genocidal, is that, according to some historians, the continuous process of Armenian dispersion started in the 3rd century, when the Armenian Highlands, as a buffer zone between the rival dynasties of Sassanids and Parthians (later the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Empire and the Ottoman Empire) was a permanent area of conflict and often a zone of hostilities (Panossian 2006; Adalian 1989). Even if the dating of this starting point is debatable, it is beyond doubt that centuries before the genocide Armenians were already creating many robust and vital Armenian communities

around the world. While the centres and peripheries were shifting, Armenians presented a constant set of diaspora practices¹⁰ that allowed them to survive as a distinct community in various cultural environments, and maintain some link with their homeland and other diasporans. They quickly developed the link of support between wealthy merchants and cultural institutions, accumulating the human and financial potential of the community and often making attempts to provide assistance to Armenians living in their historical homeland or other diaspora centres (Panossian 2006). Organisational structures and Armenian churches were quickly established as focal points of the community, providing space and infrastructure for community rituals (also religious) and networks of support. Economic successes of Armenian communities were often based on the ability to recognise and explore economic niches and to certain extend, ethnic nepotism.

The popular auto-stereotype¹¹ of Armenians portrays them as hardworking and resourceful individuals who manage to adapt to difficult circumstances and keep ethnic identities and patriotic sentiments intact despite the distance of time and space. The other side of this stereotype is a common among Armenians conviction of a certain fatalism of Armenian fate, always dependent on alien and often hostile forces, common among Armenians. What is significant, many processes we associate with modernisation of a nation took part in a diaspora environment: the first journal in Armenian was printed in Madras, the first dictionary of Armenian was published in Italy, same as was the first modern history of Armenians and the first conceptualisation of an Armenian nation-state (Panossian 2006).

It is, of course, impossible to reduce such a diverse and vast population to the limited set of features, and Armenian Americans are not a heterogeneous group; they have diversified backgrounds, vary in the intensity of relations with other diaspora Armenians, political ideals and understanding of their link to the Republic of Armenia. However, it is possible to briefly outline some aspects of Armenian diaspora in America, which are commonly pointed out by scholars (Manoian & Freinkman 2006; Panossian 2006; Bakalian 1994; Pattie 2009; Alexander 2005).

Like many other Armenian communities in the world, the one in the USA is known for its high human and economic potential. According to data provided by the World Bank, more than 30% of Armenian Americans hold university degrees (Manoian & Freinkman 2006), and it is estimated that the aggregate annual family incomes of Armenians who live in California may be 15 times higher than the entire GDP of the Armenian economy (Manoian & Freinkman 2006). It is also well organised institutionally into political parties and a few organisations channelling financial assistance to Armenia, such as the Armenian General Benevolent Union, which holds offices in 26 countries and declares to operate 45 million USD as its annual budget.¹²

¹⁰ Following Roger Brubaker, in this paper I consider diaspora as mainly ‘category of practice’ (2005: 12).

¹¹ I define autostereotype as the positive stereotype that an ethnic group forms about itself. In such meaning the term was used by Jaspars and Hewstone in the paper titled Cross-cultural interaction, social attribution and inter-group relations (1983).

¹² Armenian General Benevolent Union website, <http://agbu.org/about>.

One of the main political goals of these organisations is to lobby for the recognition of genocide by growing number of states and to assure financial support of the United States government to the Republic of Armenia. The Armenian lobby,¹³ very active in the USA, has achieved some vital successes in recent years: a significant financial aid provided to the state of Armenia, the establishment of Section 907 of the Freedom of Support Act,¹⁴ and the recognition of the Armenian Genocide by 45 out of the 50 of the United States of America. Armenian models of assimilation can be labelled as integration (Phinney et al. 2010), which means they assimilate economically while managing to maintain a strong ethnic identity.

The Armenian community in America, like as many other diasporas, is changing and evolving. Firstly, some scholars observe tensions between the so-called old diaspora, coming mostly from Western Armenia and the newcomers born in the Armenian SSR or the Republic of Armenia (Pattie 1999). Secondly, Anny Bakalian in her book about Armenian Americans underlines that the face of identity of many of them is slowly changing from “being ethnic” to “feeling ethnic”. Using the Porter’s notion of “symbolic ethnics”, Bakalian states that ‘later generation descendants manifest their ethnicity through personalised interpretations of varying mental constructions of ethnic behaviour’ (1994: 44), and they focus more on conserving it than living it. As Bakalian underlines, ‘symbolic ethnics have an interest in the events of the homeland, which they turn into another symbol, disregarding its domestic and foreign policy problems’ (1994: 45).

At the same time, Tölölyan notices another shift occurring among many diaspora communities, a transition from what she labels as ‘exilic diaspora nationalism’ to ‘diaspora transnationalism’ which also implies a change in the diaspora-homeland relationship (2012: 10). While exilic nationalism is aimed at preserving ethnic identity, diaspora transnationalism is focused primarily on the evolution of the former. Similarly, Tsypylma Darieva (2011) uses a term “diaspora cosmopolitanism”, in order to define a new phenomenon emerging among young Armenian Americans, based on their faith in the possibility of introducing sustainable development to the Republic of Armenia. During the transitional period, these two attitudes and forms of nationalism still coexist, albeit with occasional tensions and clashes (Darieva 2011).

During the Cold War, relations between Armenian diaspora and the Armenian SSR were hampered due to ideological and political differences, and the potential engagement of diaspora in Armenia could not be fulfilled. Two of the main Armenian political parties active in the diaspora, Ramgavar and Dashnaktsutyun, differed in their attitude towards Armenian SSR. While Ramgavar represented a more moderate and compromising approach, Dashnaktsutyun (Armenian Revolutionary Federation, ARF) ‘did not consider Soviet Armenia as the legitimate heir of the Armenian nation and limited their contacts accordingly’ (PFA 2010: 8; cf. Pattie 1999). However, the ethos of re-establishing the link with the homeland was vivid among the Armenian diaspora in America. Nevertheless, the

¹³ The Armenian lobby in the USA is represented mostly by two organizations: Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) and Armenian Assembly of America (AAA).

¹⁴ Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act (1992) excluded Azerbaijan from the extensive aid provided by USA to the countries of former Soviet Union. However, the tangible agency of this act is to be discussed.

collapse of Soviet Union, which eventually brought an end to the Iron Curtain, coincided with two events that did not encourage return migration, the outbreak of Nagorno-Karabakh war in 1990 and a massive earthquake in 1988, which brought heavy casualties.

What is interesting, the diaspora parties initially criticised the national aspirations in Armenia such as the Nagorno-Karabakh movement, perceiving them as a threat to the stability of Armenia. Shortly after Armenian independence, both Armenians both in Armenia and in the diaspora started to notice significant differences in political agendas and points of reference. When, in February 2008, the citizens of Armenia went on the streets of major Armenian cities to protest against election results they considered falsified, the diaspora organisations in the United States issued a joint statement rebuking Armenians in the homeland them and urging them to respect law and order. These actions have shown, that in the most difficult turning points of the young Armenian state, the preservation of the homeland was more important to diaspora organisations than the potential well-being and will of its citizens. As Pattie states: ‘by the end of the 1970’s, both sides [Ramgavar and ARF] [had] come to view Russia as a necessary protector and thus independence was not greeted with unalloyed joy’ (1999: 92). At the same time, diaspora seemingly feels betrayed with any attempt of the Armenian government toward Armenian-Turkish reconciliation. The statement of Serzh Sargsyan the President of Armenia, embodies the merit of how diaspora-homeland relations are perceived in the homeland: ‘Our Diaspora needs encouragement, so they can continue helping the “revived Armenian Republic” which in turn would help them stay Armenian through generations’ (Armenian Mirror-Spectator 2008,¹⁵ cited by PFA). This is then a relationship of mutual expectations and dependencies.

Ethnic return to Armenia

The current return of the Armenian diaspora was preceded by 3 the waves of repatriation encouraged by the Soviet authorities of Armenia in the 1920’s, in 1946–1948, and the early 1960’s. The limited character of this paper does not allow to elaborate on the experiences of these migrants; it is worth noting that they faced difficulties adapting (some of them became victims of political prosecutions) to the reality of Soviet Armenia, and many of them left the country before Armenia gained its independence (Kasbarian 2009; Pattie 1999).

These few Armenian Americans who decided to repatriate after 1990 are the those ones who strongly underline the need for more explicit and tangible forms of reconnecting with the homeland than other types of diaspora engagement. The narratives built around the reasons for moving oscillated around two central issues: the need for ‘being with the people’, Armenian people in Armenia and the urge to support the homeland in more organic, positivist way, while the latter was the prevalent one. Both include the elements of reunification, re-connection, and fulfilment.

At the same time, another regularity that have appeared was bringing certain cracks to the narrative about the reunification, as it concerns interpersonal relationships

¹⁵ Volumes of Armenian Mirror-Spectator published before 2010 are currently unavailable online.

with so-called local Armenians and the migrants' perceptions of Armenian society as a entity. In this case, the division between "Us" and "Them" became more apparent and clear. For the majority of migrants staying longer in Armenia reveals significant differences between Armenians from the diaspora and those from Armenia, which demands deeper clarification also in reference to contemporary Armenian diaspora in the USA.

Firstly, the well-developed system of Armenian schools in America provides optionally Armenian as the language of curriculum or Armenian as the a second language. However, it is mostly Western Armenian used in Western Armenia and known by Armenians in diaspora, the majority of which comes from these territories. However, the standard of Armenian used in the Republic of Armenia is Eastern Armenian language developed in Eastern Armenian territories. This difference is not, as many migrants stated, a consequence of diaspora – homeland division, but rather the geographical split has strengthened the differences already existing since the beginning of the 20th century (Panossian 2006).

Secondly, diaspora and local Armenians recall different historical events as a point of reference to their identity. While the historical memory of diaspora Armenians is shaped by the trauma of Armenian Genocide, Eastern Armenians hold the vivid memory of the Nagorno-Karabakh war, a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan that started in 1988; this division influences the political views of both groups. In the Armenian diaspora, in the situation of the long absence of an independent nation state to which to refer to, the role of the state in the national identity building process was fulfilled by the diaspora institutions, which are closely connected to three main political parties popular among the Armenian diaspora: Dashnaktsutyun, Ramgavar and Hunchakian. They are all, with varied intensity, anti-Turkish and proven to hinder any attempts of Armenian-Turkish reconciliation. It is difficult to come to a strong conclusion regarding their attitude to Russian Federation; however, the interviews with Armenian Americans living in Armenia shown that the image of Russia they hold does not differ much from the common stereotype of Russia in the West, portraying Russia as an imperialist, corrupted and underdeveloped country (Smith 2011).

Leading popular parties in the diaspora have only little support in Armenia, where people often express their loyalty toward Russia, visible both on the level of Armenian society and its political leaders tightly connected to the administration of Vladimir Putin. At the same time, growing numbers of Armenian citizens see potential benefits coming from any sort of positive agreement with Turkey, which they associate with opening for the new flow of commodities and people, that could potentially boost the isolated Armenian economy. It should be noted here that Armenia is a landlocked country bordering four states: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Iran. Currently, only two of these borders are open, and any trade and exchange can occur only through Georgia or Iran, which positions Armenia in economically disadvantaged situation and definitely influences the extremely high prices of so-called luxury goods in Armenia.

At the same time, many Armenians who took part in Nagorno-Karabakh war are still alive, the conflict has a frozen status and continues to bring some casualties every year. This issue is a recent concern to many Armenian families and for them not the Turk,

but the Azeri is the most hated Other to refer to. In the situation of economic and political instability of Armenian state, the image of Russia as a friend and supporter is very vivid among Armenians, many of whom works in Russia as a seasonal, often illegal migrants.¹⁶ Remittances sent back home from these workers constitute a significant share of the Armenian GDP.

The distrust that Armenian repatriates express toward Russia reflects their highly negative perception of Armenian political leaders accused, not without reason, of hindering Armenian development, lack of patriotic feelings, and little regard of own citizens. None of my interlocutors expressed the wish of applying for Armenian citizenship in order to take the attempt of positive change in Armenia within democratic measures. Most of them seem to be satisfied with so so-called Special Residency Status, which is given to foreign citizens of Armenian ancestry for 10 years. The SRS, as opposed to citizenship, does not include the obligatory military service. Migrants holding SRS are not given voting rights; however the majority of interviewed sojourners expressed no interest in voting, as they present high distrust toward the transparency of electoral processes in oligarchic Armenia and consider state institutions to be ineffective and even oppressive in interacting with citizens.

I was fortunate to conduct my fieldwork during the dynamic period of presidential campaign, elections and post-election events in Yerevan in 2013. I witnessed the high involvement of repatriates, either in the campaign of diaspora-born candidate Raffi Hovannisian or as election observers. Hovannisian repatriated shortly after the collapse of Soviet Union and surrendered his American citizenship (double citizenship has been permitted much later, in 2007) in order to engage in a political career; he quickly became the first Minister of Foreign Affairs of independent Republic of Armenia. However, his political career has been controversial as he used to resign from given functions, showing little willingness to compromise or political intuition. Regardless, strong majority of sojourners supported him as a candidate, even admitting openly that they did not consider him a skilled politician. One of the reasons for such an unconditional support Hovannisian received from Armenian Americans in Armenia was the lack of another strong candidate able to potentially challenge Serzh Sargsyan, who had already been holding president's chair for one term. However, the other explanation migrants were often bringing was his foreign origin, being the "man of the West", which they clearly associated with sharing Western values. After the failure of Hovannisian at the polls was accompanied by reports of a few international organisations sharing certain doubts about the fairness of elections, sojourners participated actively in the public protests.

Adequately, when many Armenians came on the streets after the Armenian president informed the nation about joining the Eurasian Custom Union with Russia, many Armenian Americans could be seen in the crowd of protestors. For them, being not formally associated with Armenian state gives them (and does, not takes away), the ability and opportunity to act toward what they consider a positive change: democratisation, economic development, increase in the respect of human rights, integration with European

¹⁶ According to the report published in 2009 by ILO.

countries and EU structures. As formally foreign citizens, migrants are not vulnerable to the oppressive state apparatus that local political activists sometimes struggle with and are more free to perform as bloggers, analysts, and activists.

However, the most significant difference between Armenian Americans and local Armenians and possibly the most difficult or even impossible to overcome is the one that comes from growing up being exposed to different value systems. First of all, the Armenian diaspora in the USA, as almost every diaspora in the world is, froze in the time and space of dispersion, keeping living memory of Western Armenia from the beginning of 20th century, a picture passed through generations in dances, cuisine, language, community rituals. While this layer of culture was preserved, others evolved under the influence of time and American society. The great robustness of the Armenian diaspora comes from the fact that it assimilates easily and acculturates slowly; and this distinction is used intentionally as Armenian Americans can be fully integrated into American economic system and society, simultaneously reproducing some aspects of Armenian culture in the family environment. But what demands underlying, they new generation of Armenian Americans balances being Armenian and fully sharing Western values, which means they put individual over the community, democracy over autocracy; they value diversity, ecology, personal freedom, and freedom of speech. Anny Bakalian, in her brilliant book portraying Armenian Americans stated that they are now in the time of transition from ‘being Armenian’ to ‘feeling Armenian’ (1994: 6). However, the sojourners, people who made the risky decision of moving, definitely label themselves as the ones who *are* Armenians.

At the same time, Armenia is the most culturally homogeneous society from of all the former Soviet states, and the majority of its society is still attached to traditional lifestyles, which brings certain understandings of relationship between individual and community or men and women. It brings certain obligation on an individual toward the family, strict division of gender roles, even very unified style of dressing up. Coming to Armenia, Armenian Americans start noticing many differences between them and the local Armenians who went through the experience of the reality of the Soviet Union with all the impact it had on society and individuals. Abstracting from the term “homo sovieticus”, which I would not like to use taking into account its essentializing potential, it must be noted that the years of sovietisation definitely influenced how Armenians perceive the relationship between the individual and the state or institution.

Regarding differences in language or political beliefs, most of my interlocutors managed to maintain a calm, reasonable tone. However, when the narrative touched on interpersonal relations with other Armenians, the tone of the conversation became more passionate, often with the tunes of irritation and frustration and the binary opposition between Us and Them became more visible, often set directly. As I managed to interact with migrants at different stages of settling, from the newcomers to those those living in Armenia for years, I noticed that this contrast is almost never expressed by migrants who arrived recently, but it becomes more apparent to those living in the country for longer.

Not without reason, to visualise this dynamic, I used to use the metaphor of cultural shock. There is a honeymoon phase, when everything seems to be different and fascinating. Some sojourners are at this stage at the moment. There is also a mastery phase,

when they finally learn how to operate in the new cultural environment, without tension or frustration. Some managed to get there. However, between these two levels, there are also the phases of adjustment and negotiation, which are the most painful and profound. At these stages, migrants have to choose, which elements of Armenian cultural and social reality they can accept and what are they ready to give up from their own lifestyles and beliefs. This is a difficult personal struggle, and many return attempts stop here, when migrants give up on their plans and decide to come back to America. It should be noted that even if the total number of sojourners from the USA remains relatively constant, the content of that group changes, as many migrants leave and are quickly replaced by others.

This metaphor of a cultural shock is convenient for me as a researcher but seems to be disturbing to repatriates themselves, who seem to deny it because it would immediately classify them as tourists or migrants, and those are categories they intentionally avoid. The core of this paper is then to answer the question: what differs Armenian repatriates from any other expats in Armenia? I have been frequently asked this question by non-Armenians I consulted or cooperated with during my fieldwork or and after. During years of living abroad in post-Soviet states, I have met many foreigners who would definitely empathise with the majority of aspects of difficult migration experiences I have outlined above. At this point I agree that the struggles Armenian repatriates experience and express can be shared with many Europeans or Americans moving to Armenia and then classified as challenges of living and working in different cultural reality.

Nevertheless, coming back to the beginning of this paper, ethnic return is not a typical migration experience for many reasons. First of all, the simple division between the sending and hosting society is blurred in this case. Most of Armenian Americans repatriating come from Armenian diaspora environment that equipped them in certain, often romantic, pre-images of Armenia: from one side a backward post-Soviet developing country but from the other, an imagined and “beautiful homeland”, a “country of Armenians”. The hosting country is then not expected to be a new and alien environment but rather the home of ancestors, a place unknown but holding much familiarity, a place where they belong, as the ethos of belonging was coming back notoriously in the interviews. To some extent, the hosting country is expected to bring the identity fulfilment that the sending country failed to offer.

At the same time, the acculturation process, in the way we understand it as fitting into the culture of the hosting society, cannot apply to the same extent as it is applied usually, because repatriates do not expect to acculturate but rather to unify completely with the culture they already represent in the most positive sense, by living in the place and being exposed to its atmosphere for the whole time. These are definitely expectations traditionally perceived migrants do not share.

However, the reality of living in Armenian puts these dismantled migration categories back in place and shows that the sending country they were born in is what they know and understand and the hosting country and its culture is indeed unfamiliar. The tension noted in the narratives of many repatriates comes from the gap between pre-images of homeland as a ‘utopian vision of paradise’ (Pattie 1999: 87; cf. Kasbarian 2009) and the reality of the Republic of Armenia, shaped in specific historical and geopolitical

circumstances. This disillusionment, often brutal in its nature, brings some sort of identity crisis when the self-labelled category of being Armenian demands rethinking in the framework of new experiences. Armenian sojourners start recognising the existence of at least two ways of “being Armenian” and are forced to position themselves in one of them and redefine their role and aim of living in Armenia, as acculturation becomes now understood as the process of giving away positive qualities they hold and is not anymore considered as to be a goal.

Two words that echoed in every interview were “develop” and “contribute”, and I consider them as a new framework in which migrants try to situate their narrative about their decisions for migration.¹⁷ I see a few potential reasons for that. Firstly, the migration and development nexus became almost notorious in the discourse regarding migration in the 21st century, especially in terms of return migration (Weinar 2010). It very strongly emphasises the relationship between migration and the inflow of investments, new technologies and, most importantly, new practices, stressing the positive impact of migrants on sending and hosting societies. Secondly, homogeneous Armenian society shares clear stereotypes of Armenian in the way one speaks, looks like, dresses up, and acts, which is portrayed in the narrative of a young female Armenian American:

People here ... for example people here don't say I'm Armenian. People don't accept my ... the way I speak. Not everybody, some people do. For example, the biggest issue I'm having is my name. Like I said, I learnt the Western dialect, so I wanna write my name in certain way. To make it harder, my name is one of the names that people give to their kids in Armenia. It's not a typical, Western Western-speaking, Lebanese, their name their kids my name. So, for me to write it in my dialect makes it worse, because they think I wrote it wrong. And I learnt it the way I learnt it all my life. So, they are telling me that at my social security card, everything I have to write it in other way. I said 'listen, you gonna make me such a fool who goes somewhere and does not know how to write my own name'. I said 'you wanna me to change my life because you want it different'?

It is interesting how the narrative about changing the way she writes her name turned into changing the way she lives, which indicates that for this interlocutor the struggle for the right to write her own name in the way she knows gained more symbolic dimension and is unknowingly perceived on a different level. The struggle over the name seems to become interpreted as an act of aggression of a more existential character.

The processes of cognition and categorisation described above are mutual and, significantly, Armenians from diaspora who come to Armenia are often marked as foreigners and aliens a long time before they notice deeper differences themselves. Becoming aware of the differences between them and local Armenians, they are often facing situations in which their Armenian-ness is challenged and questioned by the other side, so as is their right to live in Armenia and call themselves Armenian. Simultaneously, the

¹⁷ The same tendency was noted by Sossie Kasbarian, who conducted a field research among Armenians from diaspora moving to Armenia few years earlier (cf. Kasbarian 2009).

Armenian state, which has a separate Ministry of Diaspora, shows little interest in and thus provides almost no assistance to repatriates, even if the mission of this unit clearly states that it has been established to ‘bring Armenians home.’ At this point, I would risk the statement that the repatriation is not in the interest of current political elites, as sojourners do not show loyalty toward them and often challenge them through many forms of political activism.

This tension is somehow overcome by the narrative of development inspired by patriotic sentiments, which has been given as the main reason for moving by almost every migrant and has been directly expressed by one of my interlocutors who stated that he did not come to Armenia ‘to integrate, but to make a difference.’ Importantly, by ‘development’ repatriates meant mostly growth in terms of economy and the human development index, which means external categories used by most of international organisations, not local standards of positive change and improvement. The narrative of contribution has been often complemented with the emphasis on personal sacrifice, resigning from the comfort or career opportunities available in the US. As the interviews were complemented with the observation, it was however noticeable that sojourners, if they overcome initial obstacles and challenges of job market in Armenia, often occupy higher positions than they would potentially hold in America; taking into account educational background and professional experience, they also share relatively high social status. Moreover, the lower cost of living in Armenia can compensate for the salaries that are lower than in America. Holding foreign passports, being educated at American universities, often carrying financial resources that are unavailable to an average citizen of Armenia, are the factors that give Armenian Americans in Armenia the position of certain privileges and often contribute to their upward social mobility, widening the gap between them and local Armenians.

In 2012, the first organisation addressing sojourners¹⁸ entirely was established in Armenia. Repat Armenia¹⁹ devoted its mission to aiding newcomers, to some extent taking the field neglected by Armenian state institutions. A large part of its work is committed to collecting the narratives of migrants. The analysis of these brief portraits shows how the framework of contribution and development is already tightly written in the discourse regarding ethnic return to Armenia. The establishment of the organisation is also significant because it shows that sojourners consider themselves a separate group within Armenian society. It must be noted that the Armenian diaspora is well known for its ability to create solid institutional framework abroad and this strategy has been proven to be an effective diaspora practice that enables the creation of a small imagined community and provides necessary support to individuals but also maintains the symbolic boundary between Armenians and the Others.

The organisation facilitates monthly meetings called “Meet and Greet”, which usually take place in a restaurant owned by a repatriate. Each participant pays for the entry. The meeting is usually divided into three parts: one or two presentations of diaspora

¹⁸ The organization itself uses the term “repatriate”.

¹⁹ As the Repat Armenia Foundation (RAF) website states, the role of the organization is to promote repatriation among Armenian diaspora and support the integration of repatriates (www.repatarmenia.org/eng).

Armenians' initiatives (projects or businesses), then each participant has a chance to introduce himself/herself, tell say where is he/she from and how long he/she has lived in Armenia. The final part is casual and participants have time to meet each others and talk. These meeting serve migrants in many ways: to promote and support repatriate initiatives and allow to create a net of personal and social contacts and mutual support. These are exactly the diaspora practices of Armenians abroad, proven to be efficient in community building and support.

Perspectives

Observing diaspora practices among diaspora Armenians in Armenia raises interesting issues for the further consideration. I consider this to be a process of boundary maintenance, of a boundary that is both self-imposed and imposed by others. However, this is clearly not the division between two various ethnic groups, as the symbolic boundary is set between local Armenians and diaspora Armenians coming from various, often very culturally different places such as Americas, Europe, or the Middle East. The division is not set along ethnic lines, but rather is based on the mutually exclusive values that can be, for the need of this article, labelled as global (e.g. diversity, individualism, freedom, innovation, and equality) and local (e.g. homogeneity, community, control, tradition, and social stratification). Significantly, the global values are considered by repatriates as to be positive and progressive while local ones are often labelled as regressive and negative, even harmful to Armenia. At this point, differences discussed above are not any more objectified, but gain an evaluative character. The simplification and stereotyping that comes with this division seems to be an important element of the process of boundary maintenance between local Armenians and repatriates, like as if the development brought by Armenians from diaspora could occur only despite or even against local Armenians. At the same time, sojourners are often perceived by local Armenians as being culturally uprooted, disconnected with tradition and alien, often accused of arrogance and disrespect. As a result, the isolation of sojourners may deepen, while the narrative regarding development, their contribution and sacrifice becomes even more explicit. Diaspora practices used by them, such as building their own institutions and networks (professional and social) of support, definitely help migrants but can also deepen the division.

It is noteworthy that a significant majority of migration studies, both in terms of substantial research and theoretical work, are created on the ground of migration from developing to developed countries. Most of the assimilation studies available focus on migrants as a group vulnerable economically and politically and consider assimilation as the necessary condition of social mobility. In the case of Armenian Americans moving to Armenia, migrants are in many ways privileged and not pressured to culturally assimilate in order to gain financial stability. Potentially, while the Armenian economy still struggles with high unemployment and inflation, the increasing number of sojourners and their upward social mobility, as one of characteristic of their life in Armenia, may bring the competition over resources, what which will subsequently strengthen the mutual distrust between these two groups of Armenians.

These processes are ongoing and demand further consideration and deepened researching, preferably with the use of research tools developed within social sciences. The most important outcomes might require the intense fieldwork with second-generation migrants, the children of current newcomers that are sent to Armenian schools or even born in Armenia. The possibility for such research is still yet to come; however, if finally conducted, it may verify the accuracy of the theses proposed in this paper, shedding the new light on integration processes currently occurring in Armenia.

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Povzetek

Terensko raziskovanje armenskih Američanov, ki so se preselili v Armenijo, kaže, da ima fenomen migracije armenske diaspore v Armenijo teoretski pomen za študije migracij in za družbene pojave, povezane s stereotipnimi predstavami o ex-patriotih. Raziskava, ki je bila opravljena v Armeniji leta 2012, razkriva razočaranje, ki ga prinaša vračanje v domovino, vključno krizo identitete, ki zahteva vnovični premislek o odnosu do domovine. Pogosto to pomeni izoliranje od lokalnih skupnosti in zarisovanje ločnice med dvema skupnostma s pomočjo izvajanja diasporičnih praks.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: diaspora, etnični povratek, simbolna meja, ohranjanje meje, sodržavljeni

CORRESPONDENCE: KAROLINA PAWŁOWSKA, University of Adam Mickiewicz in Poznań, The Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Ul. Umultowska 89 D, 61-614 Poznań, Poland: E-mail: karolina.pavlovska@gmail.com.