Chapter 2. Discovering the Homeland – A New Generation of Armenian Diasporic Organisations

Over the last two decades, each year, hundreds of young people of Armenian descent from North America and Western Europe have been travelling to the former Soviet Republic of Armenia in order to contribute their labour and skills to this country's social and economic development. The trips, framed as forms of diasporic 'homecoming' are powered by a new generation of diaspora-based non-governmental organisations that use travel and volunteering as a means of forging distinctive, twenty-first century modes of diasporic socialisation among second- and later-generation diasporic Armenians. This chapter aims to highlight a new generation of diasporic organisations addressing the issue of temporary 'diaspora engagement' with the homeland without a centralised bureaucracy. Elsewhere, I have already reflected on the notion of homecoming by focusing on young diasporic volunteers themselves, their motivations and practices of 'return' (Darieva 2011, 2017). This chapter illuminates different aspects of diasporic mobility by focusing on agency activities and the response of the Armenian state to recent diasporic interventions.

Key to this is the building of a closer relationship between the Armenian diaspora and the Republic of Armenia. However, as will become evident in what follows, this is done in ways that tend to sidestep the 'weak' Armenian nation-state itself. Instead, Armenia is being appropriated as a more vaguely conceptualised 'homeland' in the Global South that, in both physical and symbolic terms. It is through building a 'meaningful relationship' between diasporic youth and the Republic of Armenia, that Armenian diasporic identity is being re-forged in an attempt to shore up diasporic bonds and to counter the threat of cultural assimilation, while at the same time adapting this identity to the dynamics of an ever-globalising world. This chapter sheds a new light on contemporary diasporic dynamics by describing and analysing three different bottom-up patterns of re-creating bonds and re-engaging the homeland, in

this case a weak nation-state in the South Caucasus. Young diasporic people, who seek to volunteer in Armenia, can make use of intermediary institutions, non-state organisations, which operate, using Gamlen's (2014) terms, in a 'grey zone' between international organisations and community agencies.

There are numerous diasporic non-governmental organisations active in Armenia. This study is focused on the analysis of three exemplary diasporic organisations focused on promoting 'roots' migration in the form of homeland trips and volunteering to the Republic of Armenia: Armenian Volunteer Corps, Birthright Armenia and RepatArmenia. Two of them are managed from the United States and one from Russia. Usually, diasporic organisations are registered as charitable bodies in their home countries, and they rely primarily on philanthropic donations from wealthy Armenians from the diaspora.[1] They also receive funding from large international development and aid organisations, such as the International Volunteer Corps and USAID (Ishkanian 2008). The latter are part of a growing number of transnational bodies, including the World Bank and the International Organisation for Migration (Gamlen et al. 2017), which are increasingly supporting rapprochement between 'diasporas' and 'homelands' as a strategy for stimulating development and investment in those parts of the world that are not already attracting more significant amounts of global capital. These intermediary organisations are crucial for taking decision among diasporic youth to make a long-distance homeland trip within volunteer programmes, which offer transportation and provide networking to local institutions, bureaucracies and local communities.

The concept of 'homecoming' and the desire to 'return' seems to be the main feature of any diasporic imagination (Safran 1991; Tölölyan 1991; Cohen 1997). However, actual 'diasporic homecomings' can take very different forms of attachment, mobility and meaning, depending on the historical and political context. For instance, in the late twentieth century, nation-states such as Germany, Israel and Japan instigated elaborate repatriation programmes that framed the 'return' of their historically 'displaced' ethnic populations in politically significant ways (Darieva 2005; Ipsen-Peizmeier/Kaiser 2006; Tsuda 2009; Remennick 2011). Also, Soviet Armenia started this kind of programme as soon as the early 1920s and carried on in the aftermath of World War II. Twenty-first century 'homecomings' of young diasporic Armenians present a very different example. This temporary mobility can be identified as independent grassroots 'root' or 'heritage' temporary migration, a movement from economically more developed to a developing economy. They allow us to start unpacking certain new modes of transnational interaction between 'diaspora'

and 'homeland' – interactions that have a social-movement-like dynamic, are driven by a new type of homeland-oriented diasporic organisations[2], and are underpinned by different kind of de-centralised diasporic politics, meanings, agendas and effects of which are still in the making. As I have already mentioned in the introduction, I use the adjective 'diasporic' to de-substantialise a monolithic concept of 'diaspora', understanding it not as a referring to a bounded group, but as a category of practice, imagination and claim-making.

Ethnic belonging and blood ties are critical for the membership in diasporic organisations, but not for all. What is relevant for these diasporic organisations funded by wealthier diasporic members is a new way of constructing individual identity in relation to the idea of 'serving for the nation' in a global context. They cannot be associated with state-instigated programmes for engaging the diaspora tourism – of the kind instituted by Israel, India or Ghana, for instance (Coles/Timothy 2004; Kelner 2010; Reed 2013). They seek to frame their activities as 'non-governmental forms' of an alternative 'exchange' between 'diasporic' people and the 'homeland' society. The services offered by these organisations include subsidising and coordinating air travel, finding accommodation with host families, providing volunteer work placements in local organisations, offering language courses in Eastern Armenian, and sometimes facilitating long-term stays, including permanent resettlement to Armenia. Volunteer's individual projects that these organisations claim to support are concerned with many aspects of social work, raising education levels in provincial parts of the country, civic engagement supporting women's rights, protecting the environment and struggling poverty. Considering Armenia's post-socialist economy, which is suffering from a significant 'brain drain' and dependent on labour migrants' remittances from Russia, one can expect significant impact of Western diasporic engagement for local economy. However, it seems that Western diasporic presence is still less visible in comparison to the size and meaning of family remittances and the donations made by local oligarchs in local infrastructure and villages (Pearce et al. 2011; Antonyan 2016). 'Other Armenians' have become often to the bemusement of the local population, who are trying to reconcile this exotic phenomenon with their country's continued economic decline, depletion of rural areas, political isolation, and closed borders with neighbouring Turkey and Azerbaijan (Dudwick 2003; Darieva 2011). Nonetheless, the arrival of the newcomers and the setting up of their projects has at times been controversial, resulting in tensions, mostly in their interactions with local bureaucracies.[3]

In what follows, I shall first compare the practices and ideologies of 'engagement' of three main organisations that have been coordinating the 'homecomings' of global youth of Armenian descent to the Republic of Armenia during the 2000s and 2010s. US-based diasporic Armenian philanthropists run two of these, the Armenian Volunteer Corps (AVC) and Birthright Armenia; the third, RepatArmenia, is run by Russian-based Armenians. It was only from the early 2000s, however, that one sees the rise of more systematically organised trips to post-Soviet Armenia, principally by members of the second- and later-generation of Armenian Americans or Armenian Canadians and mostly for the purposes of volunteer work. According to official figures, between 1995 and 2021, approximately 2.300 diasporic travellers, especially from the United States and Canada, but also Europe and the Middle East, have been registered as staying in Armenia between three months and two years.[4]

In the remainder of the chapter, I will examine the dynamics of positioning the Armenian state in interactions with the diaspora. The Republic of Armenia has, indeed, started to re-engage the global Armenian diaspora for its own political and economic purposes, using the bureaucratic means available to it and developing its own ideology of homeland-diaspora relations. As I shall argue, the approach of the Armenian state is by no means in contradiction or conflict with the ideologies of 'meaningful exchange' developed by the above-named non-governmental organisations from abroad. However, being articulated from a radically different position, that of the would-be 'homeland', it represents a *parallel* model, which frames the 'homeland' and the relationship that the diaspora is expected to develop with it in quite different terms.

Beyond Diasporic Homeland Tourism

Both those running these organisations and their 'clients' are second- and later-generation diasporic Armenians, aged 21–35, highly educated and well-integrated urbanites, born and raised in multi-cultural metropolitan environments.[5] The operations of these organisations are dependent on the latest digital technologies, on dynamic communication infrastructures, and on increasingly more efficient transportation networks. Mobilisation is facilitated through the use of slick professional websites and enrolment is carried out primarily through online applications, although there is often also a personalised interview process that probes the applicant's motivations and professional skills in greater depth. Detailed family history and genealogy narratives are

usually not required for a successful application, but the application process is often framed as in itself the start of a journey back to the applicant's ancestral 'roots'.

The young Armenians enrolled in those programmes are expected to not see themselves simply as 'tourists' going on a heritage tour, travelling to acquaint themselves with ancestral history and improve their cultural understanding of their 'roots'. Nor are they, strictly speaking, going on a modern-day 'pilgrimage' (Basu 2007; Schramm 2010), in order to merely 'set foot' on 'sacred' 'ancestral land'. At the same time, according to my observations and interview with volunteers, these visits are hardly experienced as a 'return home' in the literal sense of the word. Rather, the young diasporic travellers mobilised in this way are incited to think of themselves as 'pioneers' who are seeking out their 'homeland', and also as 'volunteers' who are effectively building their 'homeland'. Such activities are framed both as a form of 'adventure' and as a form of 'doing good'. This diasporic homecoming is less associated with a journey into an ancestral past, but rather with a journey into a diasporic future. For the young travellers, such a trip serves as a rite of passage that confirms their identity not simply as young volunteers, but also as 'diasporan' travellers[6] who may have a meaningful relationship with the homeland. With the term 'meaningful relationship' I mean a development of cultural identity with political implications that diasporic travellers are then expected to continue to carry for the rest of their lives, to share with others in the diaspora, and to pass on to the next generation. What is distinctive about this diasporic identity is that it is to be forged in relation to a 'homeland' that is, effectively, yet to be discovered and yet to be made into a homeland territory. This 'discovering' and 'making' of the homeland is precisely the purpose of the journey that is being undertaken and of the good work that is being carried out as part of it.

Crucial in all of this is that the destination of these organised homecomings is not the location of the actual family origins of the vast majority in the global Armenian diaspora, especially those based in North America and Western Europe. The latter's ancestors came predominantly from Eastern Anatolia, formerly a territory of the Ottoman Empire and now part of Turkey. The young diasporic Armenians that are being incited to travel to the Republic of Armenia therefore usually have neither family nor property links to this country. This situation raises intriguing questions about the political meanings and long-term implications of this project, which is, despite the above, consistently framed as the facilitation of 'diasporic homecoming'. This is the question that this chap-

ter will seek to unravel by focusing its attention primarily on the work of the homeland-oriented organisations that have over the past decade been mobilising young diasporic Armenians to engage in transnational activism.

A New Generation of Diasporic Organisations

The Armenian Volunteer Corps (AVC), established in the United States in 2001, was the first organisation to focus on connecting young diasporic Armenians living in Western countries with the Republic of Armenia in the way described above. Funded by philanthropists from Boston, AVC was established by Father Hovnan Demerjian, a religious activist from the Diocese of the Armenian Church in the United States. Building on his personal experience in Armenia as a member of the US Peace Corps in the 1990s[7], Father Hovnan sought to create a version of the latter organisation that would mobilise volunteers specifically from the Armenian diaspora – "ethnic professionals" keen to "turn good intentions into meaningful action-service that transforms the world".[8]

AVC funds and organises travel to Armenia and places volunteers in public organisations, such as schools and hospitals, or human rights and other NGOs, both in the capital, Yerevan, and in the provinces. According to AVC's own internal assessment, between 2007 and 2010, AVC supported more than 450 male and female volunteers from the United States, Canada, Western Europe, and Australia. More recently, AVC has also started to offer shorter, two-week, summer trips, calling this "voluntourism". Such trips are being marketed to "adventurous" youth who want to "be more than just another tourist", who prefer to "explore and discover a whole new world and do well at the same time".[9] Thus, AVC promotes Armenia both as an exotic adventure playground and as an impoverished society, so that those from wealthier parts of the world have a moral obligation to assist.

While AVC originally aimed its programmes at applicants of Armenian heritage, in 2013 it opened them up also to non-Armenians "of all backgrounds from across the globe".[10] Since then, ethnicity has been of relevance to AVC's project only implicitly, in that young people of Armenian heritage are still more likely to apply than others. Otherwise, AVC's promotional material is not ethnically specific, often looking more like an advertising campaign for United Colours of Benetton. If there is a significant distinction that AVC's advertising highlights it is not between Armenians and non-Armenians, but between the providers and the recipients of aid – between the 'global people' and the 'lo-

cal people'; between the young self-conscious do-gooders from the West and the grateful and welcoming citizens of Armenia. This cosmopolitan turn in AVC's strategy distinguishes it from both Birthright Armenia and RepatArmenia (discussed below). AVC operates much more like a generic development NGO, albeit focused specifically on Armenia. In other words, for AVC, the Republic of Armenia is significant less as a 'homeland' strictly speaking, and more as an exemplary site in which young 'global people' are given the opportunity to realise their more general humanitarian aspirations. The young Armenians, who are still likely to form the majority of those enrolling on AVC programmes, are certainly expected to establish a stronger emotional bond with the country in the process, but they are to do so not only because of their heritage, but even more so because of their contributions to Armenia's socio-economic development. Moreover, their volunteering experience is even more important as means of developing themselves, as human beings, or indeed as professionals. The latter is certainly flagged in AVC's promotional strategy, as evidenced in its abundant use of volunteer testimonials.

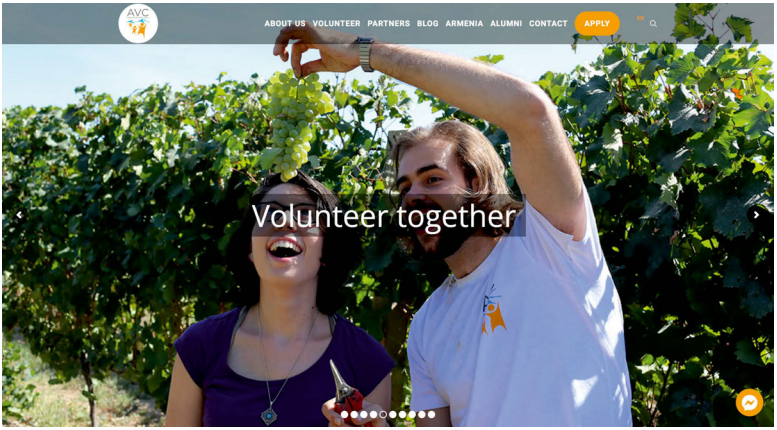
Enthusiastic verbal snapshots, which flow across AVC's homepage, speak of opportunities that their travel programme offers to those who join: "I wanted to see what kind of teacher I could be. I did it in Armenia"; "I'm 54, have 30 years' experience in publishing. I wanted to try something new, and I did it in Armenia"; "I passed the bar and wanted international law experiences and I did it in Armenia".[11]

Birthright Armenia (*Depi Hayk*) offers a very different model, one focused first and foremost on strengthening ethnic bonds within the diaspora itself. This organisation was established in the mid-2000s thanks to funding from the Hovnanian family – highly successful Armenian American real estate developers and philanthropists from New Jersey.[12] Until December 2021, 2.300 diasporic Armenian youth, aged 21–32, have participated in long-term volunteer programmes.[13] Birthright Armenia was inspired and informed by the practices of the Zionist Taglit-Birthright Israel, which is a state sponsored Israeli homeland tourism organisation. [14]

Concerned about the erosion of ethnic identity and ongoing assimilation into the cultural mainstream, Birthright Armenia looks to support a "powerful, broad-based network of organisations and individuals committed to making service to and experiences in Armenia an essential rite of passage afforded to all young Armenians across the world"[15]. Ethnic origins are crucial here and only applicants who can prove that they have an Armenian grandparent are admitted on the programme. Like AVC, Birthright Armenia pays for a round-trip

airfare, provides accommodation in a local family, and secures an internship in a local organisation or company. Similar to AVC, it blends the volunteer's own self-development with the socio-economic development of Armenia as a country. However, in contrast to AVC, it frames both 'developments' as the 'discovery' of 'roots', applying the latter metaphor equally to the young, second- and third-generation diasporic Armenians, and to the 'young' developing Republic of Armenia itself. As a Birthright Armenia flyer claimed in 2004, "[y]oung adulthood is a critical time for nourishing roots, not only for young people, but also for our developing country – the Republic of Armenia". Thus, Armenia here becomes a 'homeland' that still needs to rediscover itself as a 'homeland'; and it is expected to do so precisely through its engagement with the young travellers who are discovering it as a 'homeland' for themselves.

Figure 2.1: Armenian Volunteer Corps' Homepage



Source: https://armenianvolunteer.org/. Last accessed on 07.02.23.

Furthermore, as the leader of Birthright Armenia, Sevan Kabakian, emphasised in 2013, these volunteering trips are critical for the Republic of Armenia to become 'owned' by the diaspora as much as it is 'owned' by its citizens. As he put it:

"We need an equal right of ownership. The Republic of Armenia does not belong only to those who live here. Outsiders of Armenian descent can also be the owners. It is a great platform for Armenians all over the world, including those in Armenia. All of us should circulate together, work together, think together. With Birthright you have the right to be here and inscribe Armenia on your mental map."[16]

Figure 2.2: Armenian Volunteer Corps' Homepage

Source: https://armenianvolunteer.org/. Last accessed on 07.02.23.

What is being promoted here therefore is the 'diasporic right' to experience the 'homeland' on equal terms with its citizens; and this is arguably less about making newcomers feel they 'belong' in Armenia, and more about giving them the sense that Armenia 'belongs' to them. In Kabakian's own words: "Armenia is not just a page in the history book, not a romantic image of a pomegranate and wine grapes, not just what you eat, or just your last name, or the language that you may know or whatever, but it is much broader, and it definitely includes the state, the Republic of Armenia."[17]

This is why Birthright Armenia also offers a cultural programme that is designed to build a form of patriotic attachment to the country. These include not just standard tourist activities, such as city sightseeing, visits to historic churches or a hike to the lake Sevan; they also include tours of sites of Armenia's more recent military conflicts, such as the battlegrounds of Karabakh or those on the border with Turkey. In addition to the obligatory visit to the Armenian Museum of Genocide in Yerevan, strongly promoted are patriotic song evenings performed by local professionals. The repertoire includes Armenia's

national anthem *Mer Hayrenik* (Our Fatherland), folk and even Soviet era patriotic songs. Although this repertoire can hardly be described as part of the direct heritage of diasporic Armenians, it is presented as essential to the process of their 'rooting' in this historically, geographically and politically concrete place. What is important, however, is that this 'rooting' at the same time works as a form of appropriation of present-day post-socialist Armenian repertoire by the Western travellers of Armenian descent, if only as a vital locus on their mental maps.

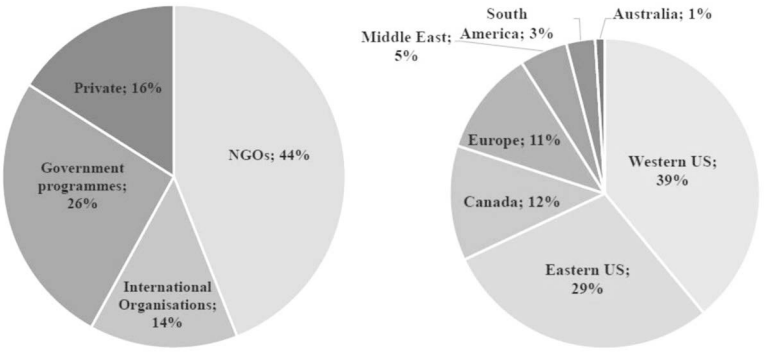
Given the aim to 'root' the diaspora in this new 'homeland', Birthright Armenia is encouraging long-term stays. While most young volunteers are expected to return to their home countries to resume their life there, the aim is also for them to maintain a durable connection with the Republic of Armenia. This is why there are also a few exemplary cases that demonstrate just how strong the connection with the 'homeland' can become. A model story is provided by the experience of the leader of the Armenian Tree Project, a 30-year-old Armenian American from California, who, after marrying one of the other volunteers, decided to stay and settle in Armenia as a founder and manager of an NGO.[18]

However, Birthright Armenia is even more interested in strengthening bonds among the young volunteers themselves. Indeed, the key ambition of their project is to create out of its volunteer network a new generation of the Armenian diasporic elite. Generating symbolic capital (i.e. honour and prestige for those taking part in such activities) is crucial to this. These trips are also expected to serve as something of a 'training ground' for subsequent diasporic community building (regardless of whether it focuses on activities in Armenia or not). Most important, however, is that this young diasporic elite bonds, and this is achieved through a set of shared bodily experiences and emotions provided in the various activities organised by Birthright Armenia – namely those of discovering one's 'roots' and building one's 'homeland'.

Table 1: Characteristics of Homeland-oriented Diasporic Organisations

Organisation	Purposes	Targets/ Volunteers	Relationship to the homeland
2001 **Armenian Volunteer Corpse (AVC)** US non-profit	Humanitarian aid, aspirations to 'transform the world'	Mixed, ethic and cosmopolitan professionals Adventure No age limits	Less nationalist, Armenia is part of the Global South
2004 **Birthright Armenia** US non-profit	Homeland trips, ethnic tourism strengthening ethnic bonds within the diaspora, 'Rooting' young diasporic elite	Young volunteers (21–35), ethnic background is strictly observed Only for those who grew up in diasporic communities	More patriotic, acceptance of the Republic of Armenia as a new homeland Armenia as a 'training ground' for diasporic elites
2011 **RepatArmenia** Russia-Armenia	Repatriation as a tool against assimilation Brain gain, new patriotism	Well educated returnees living in Russia and West, no age limits, refugees from the Middle East	Armenia is the real homeland and alternative territory, Soviet style homeland with a 'slow' landscape

Figures 2.3-4: Birthright Armenia Volunteers' Countries of Origin and the Sectors of Internship

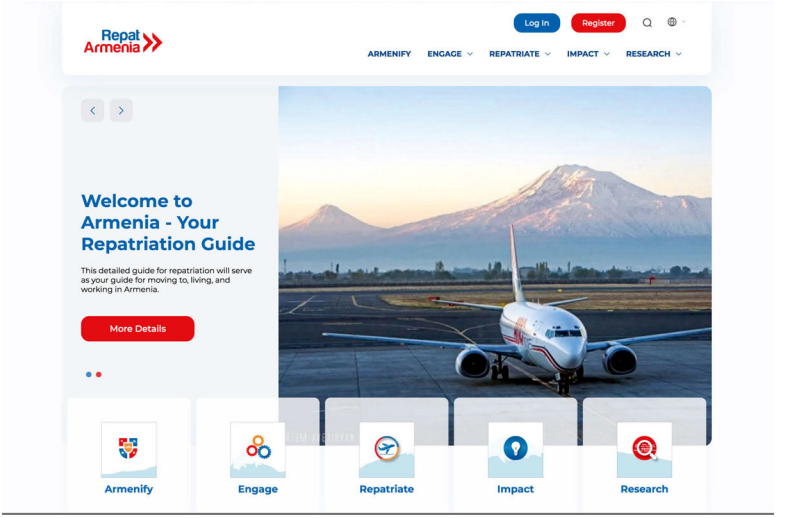


Whereas the primary form of diasporic engagement with the 'homeland' facilitated by AVC and Birthright Armenia are temporary stays that revolve around voluntary work, the goal of RepatArmenia is to bring about the permanent settlement of Armenian co-ethnics in the Republic of Armenia. RepatArmenia is the most recently established one of the three organisations discussed in this article. It is run by Armenians based in Russia, who, therefore, do have actual heritage links with the Republic of Armenia via its Soviet predecessor. They nevertheless belong to the same class of well-educated globally oriented urbanites as their North American co-ethnics, and their project explicitly targets the worldwide Armenian diaspora: they position the Republic of Armenia as a repatriation site irrespective of the would-be repatriate's family origins and current country of residence.

Moreover, according to the head of RepatArmenia, Vartan Marashlyan, a second-generation Armenian-Russian from Moscow, the people whose repatriation is being facilitated by this organisation include not only those who have never lived on the territory of present-day Armenia, but also those who used to be its citizens in the past but have emigrated over the last 25 years and have in the meantime become citizens of another country. In fact, the most important characteristic of 'repats', for Marshalyan, is not where they come from or where they live now, or what generation of diasporic Armenians they are, but the fact that they have, for one reason or another, "lost their native culture" by assimilating into another culture and have now consciously decided to "come back home".[19]

In the interview that I conducted with him in September 2013, Marashlyan acknowledged that for Western Armenians, who form the bulk of the diaspora in North America, the Republic of Armenia was not straightforwardly considered "home". Yet he dismissed their imaginary of "historic Armenia" as nothing more than a "mythic homeland". He, furthermore, presented the idea of 'Western Armenia' itself as merely a hypothetical construct without historical or political substance. Instead, he argued, those of 'Western Armenian' descent needed to come to the realisation (precisely through the kind of promotional work and mobilisation carried out by RepatArmenia) that their "real homeland" was the Armenian state, "a territory of 42.000km^2 [including Karabakh] protected by Armenian soldiers, where people speak Armenian and children go to Armenian schools, and the adults work at the Armenian Academy of Sciences". This last point is telling: it was in the Soviet Union, as a part of its distinctive nationalities policy, that National Academies of Sciences became key institutional markers of autonomous (or rather titular) nationhood.

Figure 2.5: RepatArmenia's Homepage



Source: Taken from http://repatarmenia.org/ on 07.02.2023.

Such unwitting hints at the Soviet legacy aside, given that RepatArmenia's mission is to attract not temporary volunteers but permanent repatriates, this organisation is far more positive than its competitors about Armenia as a place where a modern person can live comfortably. Indeed, while AVC and Birthright Armenia tend to foreground Armenia's socio-economic underdevelopment and need for support, RepatArmenia is keen to show that Armenia is by no means as 'backward' as is often portrayed. In fact, it goes even further: it presents the country's supposed underdevelopment as precisely what makes it attractive to live there. The main benefit of resettling in Armenia is that the country offers precisely what those stressed and saturated by their pressured urban lives in megacities, such as Moscow or New York, are craving for – a "refuge", an "alternative form of being", a "good life" in a "slow landscape".[20]

Furthermore, according to Marashlyan, resettling in Armenia does not require one to disengage completely from one's previous life in order to create a brand new one in the 'homeland'. This is mostly because twenty-first century life is understood to not be tied to a specific geographical location anyway: it takes place in a world of internet-based communication, social media

networks and global travel. Marashlyan stresses that Armenia's communication infrastructure has improved vastly in recent years and that internet access (in terms of coverage, speed and affordability) is on a par with most developed countries. This 'digital lifeline' ensures that repatriates can stay fully connected to their societies of birth and maintain personal, professional and cultural ties with these, even while living permanently in the Republic of Armenia.

As an organisation itself, RepatArmenia relies heavily on the latest technologies: it bases its entire mobilisation strategy on new forms of connectivity offered by the brave new world of social media. Much of its energies are, indeed, spent on forging 'social networks' in the diaspora – networks that are expected to serve as a form of social infrastructure underpinning their project of diasporic repatriation. The organisation is ambitious in this respect and envisages the incorporation into this infrastructure of official institutions, including the Armenian Church and Armenian state structures, such as embassies, although this plan is still in development.

RepatArmenia's does not focus specifically on providing 'aid' to Armenia, nor does it act as a development NGO. However, it does justify 'repatriation' partly as a means of creating 'brain gain' for Armenia. Repats are sometimes compared to 'colonists' that bring cutting-edge professional skills and expertise with them. For example, Marashlyan suggested in his interview that RepatArmenia's project could be viewed as analogous to the so-called 'Myasnikyan project' – the 1920s' efforts of the Armenian Bolshevik and Soviet Commissar Alexander Myasnikyan to repatriate Armenian 'national cadres', i.e. to bring to the newly formed Soviet Republic of Armenia members of the Armenian professional and cultural intelligentsia scattered across the former Russian Empire. Myasnikyan did this as a way of rapidly modernising what at the time was a backward isolated region.[21]

So far, the realities of 'repatriation' orchestrated by RepatArmenia have been rather different to the ones this organisation had originally envisaged. Since 2012, as many as 400 people from different parts of the world have submitted an application to RepatArmenia. However, not all of these applicants have been the highly skilled urbanites seeking a good life in the 'slow' city of Yerevan. Instead, and especially since 2014, over half of the applicants have been Syrian and Lebanese Armenians seeking refuge from the war raging in the Middle East. Moreover, only a small minority of these seem genuinely interested in settling in Armenia for good.[22]

Thus, Western diasporic organisations stand here as an example of the rise of a new generation of homeland-oriented non-governmental diasporic

forces that seek to be engaged in public domains outside of their country of residence. A variety of diasporic and migrants organisations that have previously run exclusively within the boundaries of local ethnic communities in the United States, Canada, or Russia, have expanded their spaces transnationally by claiming to "serve to the nation" in Armenia without giving up their identity of being American or Canadian. Instead of investing time and money exclusively to maintaining the structures of local community life in the Boston area or in California, these actors started to look toward the 'ancestral homeland' on the territory of the Republic of Armenia.

While the attitude of diasporic organisations driving these volunteer projects cannot be described as either pro or anti the Armenian state, both their rhetoric and their practice tend to downplay and side-line the Armenian state's relevance in the building of the relationship between diaspora and homeland. The metaphors that they use in their promotional materials prioritise a vaguer notion of post-territorial land (*Hayastan*, 'soil') and a broader idea of common ethnic history and culture ('roots'), rather than the institutional realities of a modern, sovereign, state-bound nation. The development that they foster is framed as contributions to building a *civil society*, rather than the return and strengthening of a nation-state. The politics of these organisations is therefore quite different to the previous politics of the Armenian nationalists in the diaspora, such as the *Dashnaks*, whose ultimate goal was the formation of a (greater) sovereign nation-state on the territory of Eastern Anatolia and the South Caucasus (Phillips 1989). Rather, the motivational slogans of these other organisations – for example, "come move the mountains", "because we can", "journey to the future" – match those used by international development programmes, and reveal a neoliberal globalist political model that transcends and by-passes nation-state structures.

Organising homeland trips for diasporic youth is not unique to Armenians, of course. There are similar movements and related activities among other immigrant and diasporic groups in the United States, Canada, Europe and elsewhere (Kelly 2000; Brettel 2003; Stefansson 2004; Wessendorf 2007; Tsuda 2009; Schramm 2010). The design of Armenian diasporic homeland trips resembles, for instance, the Israeli ten-day "tours that bind", which have been analysed by Shaul Kelner (2010) specifically as a medium of diasporic political socialisation and recently by Yehonatan Abramson (2017) as means of 'producing diaspora'. Tourism more generally has been used by the Israeli state to foster state-diaspora solidarity, targeting especially the American Jewry (Gal 2010). However, Armenian homeland trips are different in that they are or-

ganised independently from state initiatives and entail, in fact, a degree of ambivalence towards state involvement. This results in the development of alternative kinds of mobilisation infrastructures as well as a greater variety of ideologies framing the engagement between diaspora and homeland. In other words, these organisations are actively developing a new diasporic subjectivity of what a 'homeland' is, where it is located and of what functions it serves for the diaspora. As I have mentioned, these examples offer three different models of a new mode of transnational activism.

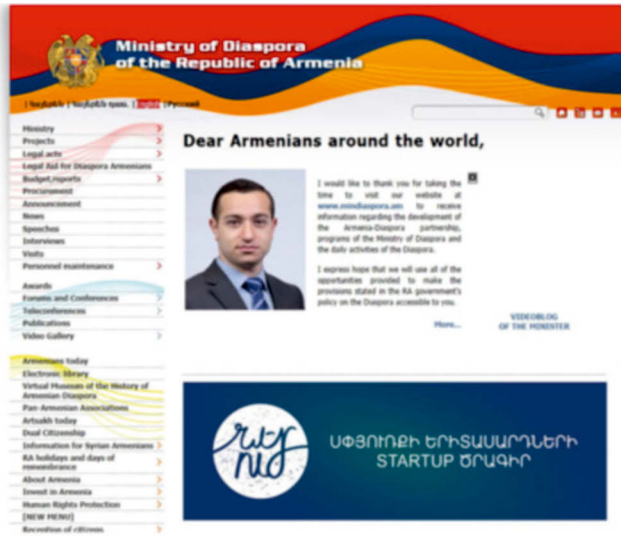
The Call of the Homeland and 'Spiritual Repatriation'

Parallel to the above-described activities of external non-governmental organisations, the Armenian state has increased, its own efforts at engaging the global Armenian diaspora more systematically. Since rejecting a measure allowing double citizenship in 1998, the Armenian government has fundamentally changed their attitude toward its diaspora and emigrants over the last two decades. Starting with organising a number of pan-Armenian conferences in Yerevan, introducing the law for double citizenship in 2006 and forming a new governmental body in 2008, the Ministry of Diaspora, the transformation ended up in October 2017 when the Armenian Minister of Diaspora, Hranush Akopyan announced 2018 to be the year of repatriation for the Republic of Armenia. The Ministry for Diaspora appealed to ethnic Armenians living abroad to return to the 'ancestral homeland'. At the same time, the President of Armenia, Serzh Sarkisyan, predicted that in this way Armenia's shrinking population would reach four million by 2040, not through the increase of birth rates and life expectancy, but via the return of diasporic Armenians.

In some respects, this is neither surprising nor unique: a great many states, including a number of other former Soviet republics, have been turning diaspora engagement into a prominent part of their international relations strategies (compare with Esman 2009; Gamlen 2010; Délano/Gamlen 2014). More and more countries focus their policies to tap resources coming from external actors such as emigrants and members of diasporic ethnic communities. Political sciences and international relations scholars argue that the origin states establish their diaspora institutions as they seek to 'tap' the material recourses and see their diasporas as a state category (Gamlen 2014). In post-communist Eastern Europe, the diasporic population has been increasingly recognised as

valuable resource and as a state category transgressing the Soviet era hostility towards exiles.[23]

Figure 2.6: Homepage of Armenia's Ministry of Diaspora (2008–2018)



Source: Taken from http://www.mindiaspora.am/en/index on 17.12.18.

What is significant about the case of the Republic of Armenia, however, is that its relationship with the global Armenian diaspora has historically been weak and ambivalent, and that its claim to be the 'homeland' of this diaspora has always been tenuous and controversial.[24]

The result is that today Armenia needs to invest greater amounts of political and symbolic labour in order to turn Armenian communities worldwide into *its* diaspora. This aspect is often overlooked in the studies of diaspora-state relations. The work that this involves is not only about forging links (pragmatic, symbolic or emotional) with communities and individuals in the diaspora; nor is it simply about trying to attract members of the diaspora and make them perceive the Republic of Armenia as their diasporic 'homeland'. Equally important to the Armenian state is to develop this (relatively new) identity of be-

ing the only 'homeland' of a well-established, prosperous and powerful global diasporic community *for itself*. In particular, this requires the Republic of Armenia to imagine in what way, as a nation-state, it embodies 'Armenianness' that extends beyond its own body politic, and how those who are Armenian by descent, but are not Armenian nationals, might then form loyalties and allegiances to it as a sovereign body. In what follows, I shall describe some of the affective ways in which the Armenian state goes about doing this.

Figure 2.7: Homepage of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs (since 2019)

Source: Taken from http://diaspora.gov.am/en on 24.01.2023.

For Armenia, a post-conflict state with limited resources and little international clout, to engage with a wealthy diaspora based in more developed parts of the world is not straightforward. Nonetheless, in 2008, the Armenian government formed a new body, the Ministry of Diaspora, which has been allocated the task to develop "the relationship between Armenia and the Armenian diaspora" and "to organise immigration, preserve Armenian identity, implement language policy, as well as collaborate with diplomatic services within the framework of Armenia-Diaspora relations".[25]

Some of top-down instruments that this Ministry is deploying to reach out to the diaspora seem rather old-fashioned. The Ministry has, for example, created a series of special state medals to reward individuals and organisations

that have made a substantial contribution to the "preservation of Armenian identity abroad" and to the strengthening of the partnership between the diaspora and the Republic of Armenia. Designed by the Ministry of Diaspora itself, these medals have been given the names of historical cultural figures and diasporic activists from the past, none of whom, however, have direct biographical connections with Armenia itself, since they were all born, lived and died elsewhere. These are "The William Saroyan Medal", "The Phogos Nubar Medal", "The Komitas Medal" and "The Arshil Gorky Medal".[26] What the Armenian state does is, first, to appropriate figures from Armenian cultural history in the diaspora into a national cultural history; then, to instrumentalise this history in the form of an official state medal; and finally, to use this material-cum-symbolic object to performatively turn the contemporary 'diaspora' into an extension of the nation that the Republic of Armenia represents as an internationally recognised political body.

Another, rather different, way of connecting an ethnically defined global diaspora with the Republic of Armenia as a sovereign nation-state has been the creation of what can be described as a form of 'limited citizenship' for ethnic Armenians. There is no law that grants ethnic Armenians in the diaspora automatic access to Armenian citizenship purely on grounds of ancestry.[27] However, since 1994, diasporic travellers can apply for Special Residency Status (hereafter SRS), which, according to the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website, "is granted by the President of Armenia to the foreign citizens of Armenian ancestry" (those who have at least one Armenian grandparent).[28]

The SRS is significant in that it permits ethnic Armenians from the diaspora to convert their feeling of being Armenian (i.e. their loose, de-territorialised, notion of 'heritage' and 'ancestry'), into something tangible that comes close to political citizenship – i.e. a complex of rights and obligations which place the applicant into a legally binding relationship with the Armenian nation-state. From the perspective of the Armenian government, the SRS is expected to facilitate the process of the newcomers' social, economic and cultural integration in the Republic of Armenia. Crucially, it stops short of enabling political integration. Indeed, the SRS entitles its holder to all the rights of an Armenian citizen except the right to vote, hold office or become part of a political organisation. Relatedly, the SRS does not entail the obligation to do national service in the Armenian army, which is otherwise mandatory for local (male) citizens. Holders of the SRS receive a special passport that differs little in format from the ordinary passport issued to Armenian nationals. However, while

one can use it as proof of one's rights in Armenia, it does not work as a travel document outside Armenia's borders.

In practice, travellers and volunteers of Armenian descent tend to view the SRS pragmatically – less as a symbol of 'citizenship' (partial as it might be) and more as a bureaucratic document that provides them with limited practical advantages: the SRS eliminates the need for an entry visa and serves as a ten-year residency permit that applies to the territory of the Republic of Armenia as well as Nagorno-Karabakh. The application fee for an SRS is not small – around $500, and there is inevitably a bureaucratic process to go through. Consequently, the SRS is not something that diasporic Armenians worldwide are rushing to acquire unless they have a specific reason to do so. Applying for it are principally those who intend to stay for considerably longer than three months (the length of stay permitted by the standard visa) and those who are travelling to Armenia more regularly. In fact, many of the young volunteers from North America said in their interviews that, even when staying in the country for longer than three months, they preferred not to go through the process of applying for an SRS, finding it more convenient to make a quick trip to the border with neighbouring Georgia and simply get a new three-month visa at a check-point.

Being first and foremost a bureaucratic document that has practical value in certain circumstances but is otherwise 'nonessential', the SRS has hardly been decisive in prompting large numbers of diasporic Armenians to convert their ethnic heritage into demonstrations of allegiance to the Armenian state. One of the reasons for this is that the Armenian state is itself treading carefully in this respect and is clearly not ready to invite foreign citizens of Armenian descent from across the world to become part of the Republic's polity in the full, constitutional sense, simply on the basis of ancestry. Indeed, proof of mere 'heritage' is not enough: further conditions need to be fulfilled – specifically, what the Ministry of Diaspora has framed as the development of a deeper, spiritual, connection with Armenia of those considered members of the 'diaspora'.

What is required, in fact, is a form of 'spiritual repatriation', which the Ministry of Diaspora encapsulates by the concept *hayadardzutyun* – meaning 'return to Armenian roots'. In her speeches, the Minister of Diaspora, Anush Hakopyan (who in Soviet times used to be the First Secretary of the Armenian Komsomol) has defined *hayadardzutyun* as an alternative to actual (physical and legal) repatriation and has also presented it as a form of flexible but

patriotic connectedness that must precede a person's acquisition of full (politically meaningful) citizenship.[29]

Hayadardzutyun is expected to go to the core of the individual's understanding of the world around him or her, and therefore assumes a fundamental transformation of the self: by 'returning to the roots', by 'reuniting' with Armenian culture and traditions (which one has forgotten, given that one has been physically and spiritually severed from the 'homeland' as the place in which this culture and traditions have been kept alive), the 'diasporan' is expected to form a new, properly Armenian relationship to the world, a different understanding of life, which includes a different experience of time, of happiness, and so forth.

This transformation of self is to be achieved through what the Ministry of Diaspora envisages as a form of re-socialisation that it expects all future repatriates to undergo. There is, in fact, something very didactic in the Ministry's approach to the inculcation of *hayadardzutyun* among diasporic Armenians. This is evident, for example, on the pages of the Ministry of Diaspora's multi-lingual online magazine *Hayeren Aysor* (Armenians Today). This publication is strewn with injunctions to its readership in the diaspora, who are treated rather like schoolchildren that keep forgetting to do their homework: "Speak Armenian at home!", "Draw your family tree!", "Spend your vacations in the homeland once every three years!", "Every Armenian must see Armenia!", "Let us sit at the table with at least three sons!", "Open a bank account in the homeland!", "Every Armenian must exist and we must grow in number!", "Return a part of your talent and gifts to your homeland!".[30] Local Armenian scholars even view a circular model of migration as the future pathway of development: "living in Armenia and working abroad", "living in the diaspora and working in Armenia" (Poghosyan 2017).

The key target of engagement here are, indeed, relatively young people, namely those who belong to the most recent generations (just as in the case of the diaspora-based organisations discussed above). However, the Armenian state's presentation of the 'diaspora' as somehow 'young' and of Armenia as, in fact, 'old' is a distinctive feature of the Ministry of Diaspora's figurative rhetoric. Some of the more 'poetic' metaphors that it uses to frame the engagement of 'diaspora' and 'homeland' cast the Republic of Armenia as a (kindly) 'grandparent' and Armenian American or Armenian-Russian citizen as (prodigal) 'children' who are being bidden to (finally) 'return home', having exhausted themselves on the busy 'playgrounds' of the globalised world. This 'return' implies that 'the child' is 'reuniting' with the home, which it had left

behind, and that it can now benefit from the wisdom of the 'grandparents'. However, there is also the implication that this 'grandparent' might also need to be 'taken care of' by the returning 'child'! The speech by Serge Sargsyan, former President of the Republic of Armenia, at the pan-Armenian youth gathering in Yerevan in 2008, offers the most explicit example of this rhetoric:

> "I am confident that the warm memories of the childhood, the kind and smiling eyes of familiar and unfamiliar grandpas, are calling you home. I know the madness of the Parisian bohemian life, your achievements in New York, the respectful glances of your Moscow friends and your own complacency constantly bring you back to your grandma and grandpa, who are telling you to 'Come home, boy'. It all comes back to the sunny smiles of your mom and dad, to your exhaustion from playing on the children's playground, all of these call you – 'Come home, boy' [...] You need your roots, to build your well-being upon them, and your maturity, and the life you've created. You need that bond tying you to your childhood, tying you to your birthplace, to your backyard, to your old grandma and grandpa, to your concerned friends and family."[31]

It is not surprising, therefore, that minors – whose self-identity is expected to be the most malleable – are particularly targeted by some of the Armenian state's more systematic programmes of diasporic 're-socialisation'. The main programme of this sort, sponsored by the Ministry of Diaspora, is the *Ari Tun* (Homebound) homeland tours, which are devised very similarly to the Israeli patriotic "tours that bind". Over the past ten years, around one hundred 13- to 16-year-old Armenian descendants have been sent by their parents from a range of different countries on special two-week trips to Armenia – tours that include visits to the major cultural, but also political hotspots in the Armenian national landscape. Indeed, they include a visit to the military barracks on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with a day spent observing the life of soldiers, eating in their canteen, and singing patriotic songs.[32]

Conclusion

This chapter has examined some of the most prominent modes of engagement and reset through which connections between the newest generations of Armenians in the diaspora and the Republic of Armenia are being built and made meaningful. The focus of the analysis has been the work done by a new gener-

ation of different stakeholders to turn the Republic of Armenia into a legitimate 'homeland' of the global Armenian diaspora, the location of its 'roots' and the 'really existing' (sovereign) guardian of the diaspora's ancestral heritage and cultural traditions.

Currently, the most active and successful drivers of engagement between modern young urbanites of Armenian descent and the Republic of Armenia are the philanthropically funded non-governmental organisations based in the diaspora itself – especially those run from North America, but also some run from elsewhere, including the Russian Federation. While there are many similarities and overlaps in the ways these intermediary organisations are mobilising young professionals to travel to Armenia and engage with it in both practical and emotional terms. Each of them has developed its own distinctive set of agendas, its own ideologies and purposes of engagement, thus constructing a de-centralised grey zone of 'exopolity' (Dufoix 2002), which is growing dynamically.

The priority of the Armenian Volunteer Corps (AVC) is the socio-economic development of an impoverished homeland that appears to be in great need of this support. For Birthright Armenia, crucial are the strengthening of social solidarity in the diaspora itself (primarily among the newest generations), the building of a new diasporic elite specifically by 'rooting' this solidarity in volunteering and other shared experiences in a physically concrete 'homeland'. RepatArmenia's ambition, on the other hand, is the dream of 'resettlement' in the 'homeland' – a 'resettlement', however, that operates mostly as the individual's response to the pressures and opportunities of life in the twenty-first century.

These brief summaries are, of course, merely heuristic simplifications; there is much more to these organisation's programmes, as the analysis above has endeavoured to show. All three organisations, which are clearly focused on mobilising an elite, combine in interesting, but different ways the romantic and the neoliberal, the nostalgic and the pragmatic, the individualist and the collectivist. They all also contain traces of ideologies that derive from other times and contexts: the US Peace Corps mission emerges as a template for AVC's project; the Zionist Taglit movement is an explicit inspiration for Birthright Armenia; certain Soviet era understandings of ethnic-based 'titular' nationhood and some early Soviet models of 'resettlement' appear to be underpinning aspects of RepatArmenia's project.

Thus, engagements between the global Armenian diaspora and the Republic of Armenia have been structured in a wide variety of frameworks through-

out the twenty-first century. This is not surprising given that these engagements have taken the form of independent, impermanent and largely fragmented movements. This certainly contrasts the more strategic state-driven projects prevalent elsewhere (compare with Zerubavel 1995; Braverman 2009; Payaslian 2010).

The Armenian state itself has also become involved, seeking to imitate some of the programmes of engagement tried and tested by other states, especially Israel. Ultimately, however, the Armenian state has been able to contribute just one more model for developing post-territorial 'meaningful' diaspora-homeland relations – a model that needs to be distinguished from those developed in the diaspora, as it is shaped by the priorities of this would-be 'homeland' as a state. Moreover, one could say that, just as diasporic Armenians have remained ambivalent towards the modern Armenian state, so is the Armenian state showing some ambivalence towards the co-ethnics abroad. The Armenian state's priority remains strengthening itself as a sovereign nation-state, specifically in a set of geopolitical projects positioned in a complex way between Russia, Turkey, Iran and the United States.

As should be clear from all of the above, the connections that are being established between the newest generations of Armenian diasporic activists and the Republic of Armenia are still very much in the making. For now, the *meanings* that are shaping modern diasporic engagement with the homeland are plural, ambiguous, and de-centralised. The ways, in which diasporic organisations 'discover' their homeland, are non-strategic and the reasons for this are multiple. The fragmentation of agendas driving this engagement is due to a complexity of historical legacies, the 'weakness' of the Armenian state, and the grey zone where these diasporic organisations operate. The politics of engagement between Western diasporic communities and the Republic of Armenia are likely to remain disparate and pluralistic for those same reasons. The above analysis of the different agents, however, should provide a useful basis for observing future developments and making sense of new directions in which this engagement might evolve.

Notes

1 The US ones are registered as 501 (c) (3) NGOs, i.e. organisations that are exempt from federal income tax because they pursue charitable, educa-

tional, religious and scientific purposes and that are allowed to conduct such activities outside of the United States.

2 Compare with Gamlen et al. (2017) observation of the rise of diaspora institutions worldwide.

3 Many of those interviewed indicated their frustrations in dealing with local officials and having to negotiate around various corrupt practices that they encountered in Yerevan's everyday life.

4 This figure was cited by Sevan Kabakian, the leader of Birthright Armenia in the interview conducted in September 2014. There is a considerable number of informal non-registered short-term stays of Western Armenians with the aim to volunteer in Armenia.

5 For a closer analysis of motivations expressed by these volunteers, see Darieva 2017.

6 The term 'diasporan' is a self-definition widely used by diasporic organisations and individual activists who see themselves as members of the Armenian diaspora (*spuirk* in Armenian). As for a numerous group of Armenians in Russia, who have been leaving Armenia over the last twenty years mostly as labour migrants they do not use this term and build a separate group of transnationals with a relatively weak diasporic consciousness.

7 The US Peace Corps was initiated by John F. Kennedy for students to volunteer in developing countries.

8 See https://www.armenianvolunteer.org/index.php/who-we-are/team. Last accessed on 09.03.2017.

9 See https://www.armenianvolunteer.org/index.php/voluntourism. Last accessed on 09.03.2017.

10 See https://www.armenianvolunteer.org/index.php/our-process. Last accessed on 09.03.2017.

11 See https://www.armenianvolunteer.org/index.php/programs/professional-corps. Last accessed on 09.03.2017.

12 Like other families established in the diaspora, Hovnanian who is from Iraq and arrived in the States in 1948 also had conducted many charities for internal purposes within the Armenian community in the United States (the Armenian Church related to Antelias, Dashnaks youth associations) before helping the Republic of Armenia after the earthquake.

13 See in https://mirrorspectator.com/2021/12/03/celebrate-international-volunteer-day-on-december-5-with-birthright-avc/. Last accessed on December 28, 2022.

14 The Armenian Birthright Program (since 1999) differs from the Birthright Israel Program in the statistical dimension of the participants and in the length of the programme. While Birthright Israel (over 750,000 participants) has a very high number of participants, Armenia has a relatively long program duration (minimum of two months). In comparison, the Birthright Israel program runs for 10 days. See https://www.timesofisrael.com/birthright-israel-begets-an-armenian-offspring/.

15 See https://www.birthright.am. Last accessed in 2019.

16 Interview carried out by the author in September 2013.

17 Ibid.

18 From the interview with the leader of the Armenian Tree Project, carried out on 05.09.2013.

19 Interview with Marashlyan conducted by the author on 02.09.2013.

20 Ibid.

21 The most prominent names among builders of the early Soviet Armenian nation are Alexander Tamanian, architect and author of the first general plan for the modern city of Yerevan, and Martiros Saryan, the founder of a modern Armenian school of painting.

22 Armenia's own official welcoming policy towards Syrian Armenians includes resettling refugees on the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. According to Ministry of Diaspora, approximately 20.000 Syrians of Armenian descent were received by the Armenian government.

23 To name some examples, in the 1990s, Croatia was a trendsetter to extend the ethno-national self through a post-territorial citizenship policy (Délano/Gamlen 2014), while post-Soviet Kazakhstan encouraged the in-migration of ethnic Kazakhs from surrounding regions to increase the titular nationality's proportion of the population. Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Georgia turned their interest towards migrants living abroad (Darieva 2005). For that the President of Azerbaijan proclaimed 31 December to be the Day of Solidarity for Azeris across the world. Both countries set up their own Ministries of Diaspora, attempting to impose a better control over co-ethnics abroad and expatriate cash flows.

24 It was the Soviet regime, which was suspicious towards ex-territorial co-ethnics and the 'diaspora engagement'. See in Mouradian 1979 and Ter Minassian 2007. I am grateful for this note to one of anonymous reviewers of this paper.

25 See https://www.birthright.am. Last accessed in 2019.

26 William Saroyan is an American writer of Armenian descent, who was born in 1908 in California, United States into an Armenian family that emigrated from Bitlis in, then, the Ottoman Empire (now Turkey) and who died in 1981. Poghos Nubar was born in 1851 in Alexandria, Egypt and died in 1930 in Paris, France. He founded the influential international organisation Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) in Cairo, Egypt in 1906. Komitas Vardapet is a composer and musicologist of Armenian Christian music. He was born in 1869 in Kutahya, Ottoman Empire (now Turkey) and he died in 1935, in a mental hospital in Paris, France. Arshile Gorky is an Armenian American painter who was born in 1902 in Van (now Turkey) and who committed suicide in Connecticut, US, in 1948.

27 It is worth noting that between 1995 and 2006 Armenians were not allowed to hold dual citizenship. However, the latter has been reinstated in 2006, enabling Armenians who live abroad and acquire alternative citizenship also to remain citizens of Armenia.

28 One should note, however, that the SRS is also awarded to 'other distinguished individuals, who have provided significant services to the Armenian state and nation and/or are engaged in economic and cultural activities in Armenia'. See http://www.mfa.am/en/residency/. Last accessed on 15.09.2022.

29 See http://www.mindiaspora.am/en/Programs. Last accessed on 09.03.2017.

30 See https://www.hayernaysor.am. Last accessed on 15.09.2022.

31 See http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-mesages/item/2008/07/14/news-7/. Last accessed on 09.03.2017.

32 I am grateful to Eduard Melkonian, Armenian historian and expert in the issues of the Armenian diaspora, who shared this information with me in Yerevan, in September 2013 and in November 2017.