

# Armenia in Public Perceptions: The Case of Armenian Youth

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## Abstract

This article is informed by a trip to Armenia and fieldwork in the capital city of Yerevan. Based on findings and evidence from fifty interviews conducted in Armenia and the diaspora, in conjunction with mobility research analysis, this paper explores the changes Armenian society has undergone since the 1990s and how shifts in world politics reflect on the country's reconnection with its European bonds. The general question is whether the new generation of Armenians identifies itself more closely with Russian or European society. To arrive at an answer, the article elaborates on Armenia's relations with Russia and the European Union, revealing the key factors that influence the orientation of Armenian society in contemporary history. The article, therefore, aims to contribute to understandings of past and present Armenian society, and the factors that affect and determine their cultural identity and foreign policy choice, as well as their sense of belonging.

**Key words:** Armenia, Youth, Society, Culture, Identity, EU, Russia, Revival

## Introduction

In the history of Armenia, the 20th century has been marked by independence and the development of a new statehood. The aim of this article is to understand how changes in world politics after the break-up of the Soviet Union affected issues of identity and cultural belonging of Armenian society towards the European Union and Russia. My initial assumption is that it is essential to understand actors' perceptions and justifications for behaviour, while maintaining analytical distance.<sup>1</sup> Thus, I start by introducing some of the vital issues that determine Armenia's relations with Russia and Europe, exploring diverging priority interests between state politics and society's preferences, using empirical evidence gathered in summer 2018. In conducting this work, I

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<sup>1</sup> Doug Blum, *The Social Process of Globalization: Return Migration and Cultural Change in Kazakhstan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 62 [hereafter, Blum, *The Social Process*]; Theodoros Iosifides, *Qualitative Methods in Migration Studies: A Critical Realist Approach* (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011).

am seeking to clarify contemporary scholarship by mapping out existing ways of conceptualizing Armenia's independence and its people's relations to Russia and the EU. This is a timely moment at which to conduct research with Armenian youth due to recent political developments – a consideration that provided additional impetus for my research. These developments clearly demonstrate the gap between society and politics, and the values of the new generation. By engaging with Armenia at the present time, we observe the importance and influence of cultural affinity and geographical proximity on state behaviour and people's choice. The main question of the research is how the new generation of Armenians identifies itself in terms of cultural belonging in accordance with the country's foreign policy course.

#### *Notes on the Scope, Methodology and Data*

The article is based on the evaluation of fifty interviews and relevant literature, as well as on information from official state documents, archival sources, bilateral agreements and my personal mobility experience in the EU and Russia. My interviewees are highly-skilled young Armenians between the ages of 18 and 35 years old, who have experienced education-oriented mobility in and between Armenia, Russia, Europe and the United States. They were contacted in person, and through social networks. I was able to reach out to young people of different social categories: Yerevan natives, students from other regions of Armenia, diaspora representatives, and accidental passers-by. Overall, 11 respondents returned to Armenia after education and work exchange programmes in the EU and/or the U.S., seven respondents are highly-skilled immigrants who remained in their destination countries (two in the U.S. and five in the EU), three of my interviewees are Russia-born Armenians who decided to settle in Armenia (they were random passers-by in Yerevan), five people are return migrants from Russia – from the cities of Moscow, Yekaterinburg, Saratov and Rostov-on-Don – one person is an Armenian volunteer from Jordan, and 23 respondents are citizens of Armenia, four of whom are students from regions residing in Yerevan. The selected age category and location are purposeful, intending to compare the answers

of those who were born in the Republic of Armenia after the 1990s with those who experienced the transition from the Soviet Union to an independent republic. The interviews were conducted and recorded in English, Armenian and Russian according to their preferences, and then translated into English. Fluency in these three languages and awareness of public and everyday life, as well as the challenges people face, built a trusty atmosphere in which most of the interviewees elaborated on their answers, turning them into narratives. Yet the focus of my analysis is on questionnaire responses, while narratives came along as supplementary material. The questions started from socio-economic data moving on to more personal questions about mobility motives, political views, as well as advantages and disadvantages of life in and out of Armenia.

To understand the mobility choice for temporary and permanent migration I asked my interviewees what greatly influenced their decision to remain in or return to Armenia. By comparing the status and life of Armenians in Europe and Russia, I aim to determine the impact of mobility on both ends. After all, return migration constitutes a significant vector of globalization, with the latter being defined as the transnational flow of ideas, capital, goods and services, people, and technology. As such it offers a potentially valuable arena for examining how and why cultural change, mixing, and/or reproduction occurs.<sup>2</sup> The assessment of the fifty interviews, therefore, helps me to identify a number of key factors that influence the cultural identification of young Armenians and their political decision-making.

The academic value of this work is present in its contribution to the mobility research field – utilising the example of Armenia's youth mobility decision-making and social behaviour – as well as the study of political sociology in micro-level orientation, as the work examines the distinction between the social and the political, social identities in Armenia, political behaviour and the attitudes of Armenian youth. I analyse the implications of the relationship between youth mobility and social behaviour for the functioning of a democratic political system, as ‘social characteristics

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<sup>2</sup> Blum, *The Social Process*, p. 3; Jane Jackson, 'Globalization, Internationalization, and Short-Term Stays Abroad', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 32: 4 (2008), pp. 349-358.

determine political preference.<sup>3</sup> Few studies have examined the relationship between mobility and political attitudes,<sup>4</sup> and less attention has been paid to the equally important question of the consequences of mobility for the individual and their society;<sup>5</sup> therefore, the central theoretical claim is exploratory, as the study about the relationship of mobility to political behaviour is still developing. Nevertheless, many sociologists have maintained that social mobility has an important influence on politics. John Goldthorpe (1987) concludes his study of political mobility in Britain by discussing the political implications of changing patterns of mobility.<sup>6</sup> Nan Dirk de Graaf and Wout Ultee (1990), building on work by Michael Sobel (1981, 1985), claim that mobility effects can be better understood by considering the relative influence of origin and destination.<sup>7</sup> The interdisciplinary approach to the research, therefore, combines qualitative fieldwork and interpretive analysis, and explains how and why cultural change within Armenian society has occurred.

Pitrim Sorokin defines social mobility as ‘the movement of individuals or groups from one social position to another and the circulation of cultural objects, values and traits among individuals and groups.’<sup>8</sup> This includes an inquiry into the relationship between identity and “reflexivity,” exploring how interviewees approach political changes and identity construction, as well as the interconnection and influence of these two factors on society. Almost all theorists who have discussed the relationship of mobility to politics acknowledge the influence of mobility on societal opinions and political views. The heart of the article is therefore the empirical material, as the assessment of interviewees’ responses helps us understand how the youth make decisions with regards to Armenia's relations with the EU and Russia, as well as investigate the relationship

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Abramson and John Books, ‘Social Mobility and Political Attitudes: A Study of Intergenerational Mobility among Young British Men’, *Comparative Politics*, 3: 3 (1971), pp. 403-428 (p. 403).

<sup>5</sup> James Alden Barber, *Social Mobility and Political Behavior* (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1965), p. 14 [hereafter, Barber, *Social Mobility*].

<sup>6</sup> David Weakliem, ‘Does Social Mobility Affect Political Behaviour?’, *European Sociological Review*, 8: 2 (1992), pp. 153-165 (p. 1).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Barber, *Social Mobility*, p. 5.

between mobility, social behaviour and political attitudes. In short, the purpose of this work is to understand the structural conditions in which, and the individual thought processes and social dynamics through which, ideological change and/or (re)production<sup>9</sup> have occurred within Armenian society, highlighting the gap between individuals' societal affinity and the country's foreign policy orientation.

### **Polarization of Politics and Society: Politics Matters**

The post-Soviet era in the history of Armenia is marked with remarkable changes in society and the rebirth of its historical and cultural relations with Europe. The 1990s witnessed the eruption of a global identity crisis. Almost everywhere one looked people were asking, "Who are we?", "Where do we belong?" and "Who is not us?".<sup>10</sup>

Armenia stepped on to the path to independence with heavy baggage of internal and external troubles, such as a devastating earthquake and the Karabakh movement. The latter was a unifying force that brought Armenians from all around the world together to stand for self-determination rights of native Armenians in their historic land. The answer to the aforementioned two questions was clear for Armenians, because they make up a unique nation, and through their history have lived, created and established statehood in the place where they originate from.<sup>11</sup> While Armenians have never moved from their historic lands, they saw the rise and fall of their kingdoms and throughout centuries Armenia became a disputed territory for great powers and empires, with the last one experiencing over two hundred years of Russian domination since the eighteenth century, including the common Soviet past. Nevertheless, while the Soviet Union strengthened its position in Armenia and the Caucasus, and post-Soviet Russia appears (with its hard power policy in the South Caucasus region) to be reinforcing its influence in the regional geopolitics of the strategically

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<sup>9</sup> Blum, *The Social Process*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remark of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 28 [hereafter, Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*].

<sup>11</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, 'Armenian People', <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Armenian-people>> [accessed 06 June 2020].

important zone between the Black and Caspian Seas, Armenia has been able to preserve its national identity from russification, because the central elements of any culture or civilization are language and religion.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, following the decline of the Soviet Union, the question among Armenians was “who is not us?”, since in the state of war in the early 1990s, Armenia needed to understand who is “with us” in the war for national survival. The country needed a strong military ally that came from Russia, whereas neither the EU nor the U.S. were militarily involved in national and political conflicts in the South Caucasus. Landlocked between and bordered by three Muslim-majority countries, having a territorial dispute with Azerbaijan, and a dramatic past with Turkey, Armenia's relations with Russia were justified by the country's security concerns, while the West ‘had no intention of sending U.S. peacekeepers to the Caucasus’.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in the shadow of and in response to the newly formed coalitions (GUAM, BTC, BTE) bypassing Armenia and Russia, both countries observed a threat.

Nevertheless, with the establishment of a new statehood, Armenia entered the international system and the zone of political and economic interests of the West, and vice versa. The West was attracting the young generation of Armenians with its quality of education, living standards and professional opportunities. America's mass culture was exercising a magnetic appeal, especially on the world of youth.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, foreign policy was pursued not only with the traditional weapons of diplomacy and military might, but also with the novel weapon of propaganda.<sup>15</sup> The new generation in Armenia was demonstrably turning towards the West, demonstrating the fine line where the roots of polarization within politics and society sprouted, because Armenia's geographical location and relations with its neighbors were calling upon a strong military ally that came from Russia, and was not suggested by the EU or the U.S. Armenia's external threat brought the country closer to Russia

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<sup>12</sup> Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Turkey's Military: The Real Government’, *The Armenian Reporter International*, VOL. XXX, NO. 40, July 5, 1997 (Harvard College Library Collection), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 25 [hereafter, Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*].

<sup>15</sup> Hans Morgenthau, Joachim Thompson and Kenneth Waltz, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Singapore: McGraw-Hill, 1997), p. 168.

first militarily and politically, and then economically, too. After the dissolution of the USSR, the most important document signed between Armenia and Russia was the Armenian-Russian military agreement of 1995. It highlighted 'mutual interests in protecting sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Armenia.'<sup>16</sup> Therefore, in the 1990s, the security issue was imperative for both countries, yet, the partnership and cooperation with Armenia that began mostly due to mutual security concerns soon turned into Russia's military and economic dominance.

Contrary to the politics of so-called complementarity and the multi-vector approach, Armenian-Russian bilateral relations were informally prioritized. Strategic interests and partnership gradually turned into bandwagoning, where 'the weaker state ensures its security with allying stronger state'.<sup>17</sup> Armenia's defensive policy in the region, its security concerns, geographical location and neighbourhood unbalanced the Armenian-Russian relationship, reinforcing Russia's influence in Armenia and through Armenia in the South Caucasus. However, it should be noted that Armenia's political course was contrary to the Western preferences of the youth and their mobility choice, as a new generation of Armenians, with a mix of European and American culture, was formed in Armenia. While the Russian labor market was more affordable for Armenian citizens, the new youth had pro-Western orientation and a desire to develop relations with Europe, being attracted by high living standards, quality of study and reconnection with European culture.

Despite 70 years of common Soviet history, and the development of Armenian-Russian relations due to Armenia's problematic relations with its neighbours, Armenia's history with Europe is much older. Europe was considered as a cradle of knowledge and art for centuries, while the base of the Armenian-Russian relations were put in place in the 19th century. On the other hand, Russia

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<sup>16</sup> 'Armenian-Russian agreement on deployment of Russian military base on the territory of the Republic of Armenia'. Signed on March 3, 1995, entered into force on August 29, 1997, Preamble, p. 1 <[http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/international\\_contracts/2\\_contract/-/storage-viewer/bilateral/page-310/47983](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/2_contract/-/storage-viewer/bilateral/page-310/47983)> [accessed 27 August 2018].

<sup>17</sup> Keith Shimko, *International Relations: Perspectives, Controversies and Readings* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2014).

has been acting mostly as a military, economic and geopolitical power, conditioned by its strategic interests in the Caucasus. This division became more apparent after the fall of the USSR, when Europe reappeared in the South Caucasus as a soft power. The EU's soft diplomacy with Armenia and the South Caucasus is conditioned by three factors: its own security concerns, energy policy and the Turkish factor. The EU has a direct border with Turkey, with whom it had ongoing fierce clashes for centuries. The last time Turkey aggressively invaded a piece of Europe was in 1974, with the occupation of Northern Cyprus, meanwhile Russia, throughout its history, has been able to defeat Turkey in 11 out of 12 wars. Therefore, Armenia's pro-Russian policy, as well as corruption and a high percentage of migration, became reasons for polarization between the government and society. However, the presence of an ethnically homogenous society in Armenia has played an important role in the preservation of national identity, the language and religion. Recently, this unity has been demonstrated at least three times: in 1988 during the Karabakh movement, in 1991-1993 throughout the Karabakh war, and during the Velvet Revolution in 2018. What is common between these three events is solidarity of people, yet, between 1988 and 2018, society has undergone a major change in terms of its relations with Russia and its policy towards Armenia.

### **New Developments Within Society: Reconstructing Identity**

While Armenia of the late 1980s was united with a strong national, patriotic movement, it later illustrated the close but problematic relationship between democracy and national identity. National interests became a tool in the hands of the government to justify democratic shortcomings that led to and strengthened corruption and the rule of oligarchy. Yet, as one of the most prominent Armenian writers Yeghishe Charents noted: 'Oh Armenian people, your only salvation lies in the power of your unity'. And indeed, it was something disregarded by the ruling Republican party, and something that united the nation to stand for their rights in April 2018, demanding the end of corruption, promoting the rule of law and democracy.

Armenia of 2018 was no more the Armenia of post-communist transition. It already had a



young generation of well-educated people who had strong commitments to and faith towards democracy. Now I explore the transformation within society during the last 30 years and the impact of mobility on social processes since the Soviet break-up. Despite Armenia's politics becoming strongly tied to Russia, the new generation was academically and professionally (re)connecting with Europe and the West at large. After all, the extent to which individuals engage with the host society while abroad will influence their values. My evidence consists of the analysis of 50 qualitative interviews conducted between July and September 2018 in Armenia and Europe, as well as with the U.S.-based young professionals, illustrating some of the challenges and opportunities associated with the EU and Russia. I draw together independent analytical judgements based on my interviews and personal observations, in order to posit specific causal mechanisms and emergent properties – regardless of whether they are perceived by subjects.<sup>18</sup> I also rely in part on the interpretations of participants themselves, thus including them to an extent as ‘peer researchers.’<sup>19</sup> My goal is to locate individual narratives within a broader inter-subjective framework, making it possible to gauge the significance and resonance of particular claims.<sup>20</sup>

### *Interviews and Interviewees*

The opening questions in the interview helped to establish a socio-demographic portrait of the individual. This included not only personal details such as their name, age, gender and place of residence, but also details regarding their academic, professional and family backgrounds. Responding to these questions was often relatively straightforward, but sometimes, the complicated nature of personal history revealed many interesting details. My initial enquiries included the question of past mobility experience as an individual or family member, including previous

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<sup>18</sup> Blum, *The Social Process*, p. 63; Oliver Bakewell, ‘Some Reflections on Structure and Agency in Migration Theory’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36: 10 (2010), pp. 1689-1708.

<sup>19</sup> Blum, *The Social Process*, p. 63; Dirk Schubotz, ‘Innovations in Youth Research’, in Sue Heath and Charlie Walker (eds.), *Involving Young People as Peer Researchers in Research on Community Relations in Northern Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 101-120.

<sup>20</sup> Blum, *The Social Process*, p. 65; Andrew Chadwick, ‘Studying Political Ideas: A Public Political Discourse Approach’, *Political Studies*, 48: 2 (2000), pp. 283-301.

residence in Russia, the U.S. and the EU. I was then able to introduce questions about whether people ultimately viewed themselves as culturally Russian or European. The responses to this question encompassed a wide range of issues – not only concerning history and culture, but also politics and reality – with some people more closely identifying themselves with Russia, or Europe, than others. The issue of connectedness to Armenia was also prominent. This included what respondents thought about life in Armenia conditioned by changes in Armenian society and politics, the feeling of freedom and belonging, as well as connectivity between the country and diaspora.

Such an example is 21-year-old, Moscow-born Arthur. He had visited Armenia before and had a firm decision in mind to live in Armenia. He is from an ethnically-mixed family, his mother is from Abkhazia while his father is Armenian. Raised in Russia, his first language was Russian, yet he would identify himself as an Armenian, and considers Armenia to be his homeland. He decided to learn Armenian at the age of 17 and is now fluent in conversational Armenian. Life in Yerevan is challenging, but despite its disadvantages, he feels comfortable, and the challenges somehow help him to cope with difficulties, accept disadvantages and work towards making the country a better place. “In Russia, disadvantages were unacceptable, they repel and keep me distant,” he said. “Armenia is the place where I feel comfortable, integrated and demanded’.

The experience of repatriates from Russia is the feeling of being an outsider – labelled *ponaekhavshie* or a non-local member of the population especially in Moscow) – the lack of tolerance and similarities within and with the Russian society, and eventually a cliché – a general Caucasian identification known as “*litso Kavkazskoy natsionalnosti*.” This was a driving force to reconnect with the homeland. Here I would like to share and insert my personal experience with this identification and the gap within Russian society. In August 2007, I attended a summer school at Ural State University in Yekaterinburg, entitled ‘Multiculturalism, Religions and the Foundations of Morality in Contemporary Political Thought’, part of the ReSET HESP Program, under the auspices of the Open Society Institute. One of our speakers was Vladimir Putin's former adviser on national minorities, who was curious whether there were Armenians in the auditorium or not. I introduced

myself, and she warmly welcomed me, speaking about Armenians' contribution to Russia's intellectual and cultural life, noting that unfortunately, after the Soviet collapse and due to the high percentage of seasonal migrant workers from the Caucasus, a general identification is applied to all migrants from the region, without differentiation of national identity and cultural belonging. However, she mentioned that among Russia's political, academic and business elite, Armenians historically belong to and represent a well-educated and intellectual community of migrants in Russia.

Continuing the discussion of my return migrants' experience, I have noticed that after moving to Armenia, they observed cultural differences with Russia more strongly. Most interviewees acknowledged that while Armenian-Russian relations are still close, the countries have two different societies. They also indicated the legacy of Soviet politics; for example, the presence and extension of a Russian military base in Armenia until 2044. Armenian society is however also deeply offended by Russia for many reasons, such as the arms export policy that sells weapons to Azerbaijan, frequent changes in gas prices, the murder of an Armenian family of six in Gyumri in January 2015 by Russian soldier Valery Permyakov,<sup>21</sup> and manipulation within the Karabakh conflict. The prominence of Russia has drastically declined in many respects, demonstrated by the pro-Western orientation of the youth, their mobility choice, and the most obvious example being the preference for English as one's first foreign language, rather than Russian. It is noticeable that Russia is less appealing to those who wish to continue their studies, with its universities regarded as less attractive compared to European and American institutions. However, Russia remains a popular destination for its accessible job market and visa-free entry. Thirty-five percent of interviewees either wish to go there or have already lived in Russia. The reason for choosing Russia as a destination is mainly conditioned by its geographic proximity, knowledge of Russian and having relatives or friends there. Several interviewees talked about russification and assimilation, and how

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<sup>21</sup> BBC News, 'Russian Soldier Jailed for Life for Killing Armenian Family', (2016) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37168865>> [accessed 22 April 2019].

this influenced their decision to repatriate.

For example, Kristina, a 24-year old repatriate from Rostov-on-Don who is from a Georgian-Armenian mixed family, moved to Armenia in 2018. Her mother is Armenian, and her father is Georgian. She had told her parents since childhood that when she grew up, she was determined to live in Armenia. As a child, she would spend summers in both countries but felt a stronger connection to Armenia. "It is my country, something kept calling me back," she stated.

Growing up in a Russian society, these interviewees still kept their Armenian traditions and ties strong. Kristina's mother would tell her about the role of women in the family and taught her some good cooking skills. As a child, she was firm in her decision to move to Armenia, despite not speaking Armenian well. "There is an atmosphere here, there is an energy that charges you, and that's what we lack in Russia," she said. "People are very communicative, very approachable, they are not indifferent to you." What she has observed is that young people in Armenia speak better English than Russian. In Armenia, she feels reconnected with her roots. She confirmed this by stating: "I found myself, I feel happy, I live among my brothers and sisters. In Russia I was feeling lonely, society is closed, people are cold. In Armenia people are warm and love hugging, they are kind, warm and welcome." Living in Russia and being half-Armenian, she felt that the bonds were so strong that nothing could change her identity and belonging.

As such, the main issue of Armenians in Russia does not concern whether they are more European or Russian, but rather the preservation of their Armenian culture, traditions and identity. This is important for Armenians in the U.S. and Europe as well, but the difference is the assimilative policy of Russia, while societies and politics in the West are comparatively liberal. Therefore, the dilemma for them is between Armenia and Russia where the former is preferred to the latter for many reasons. For example, Marine, a 28-year-old lawyer from Saratov, had a strong mobility background. After graduating from university in Russia, she wanted to continue her education in France, but faced bureaucratic issues related to her visa. "With Russian citizenship it is hard to access the Western world," she stated. This experience made her rethink her belonging and

identity, “we are Armenians and wherever we live, we will be foreigners,” she said. “I have my country, it is Armenia and I decided to continue my life in my country. There are many problems in Armenia of course, but when you love the country you look at things differently, you accept them, and you look for the ways to change and develop.”

With regard to those who are planning to move to Russia for work, and to illustrate a relatively positive situation, we can discuss the experiences of Gurgen, a 27-year-old married Armenian living in Yerevan. He is self-employed but frustrated by the economic situation and thinks that he would benefit from a move abroad. His reasons for choosing Russia relate to what he has learnt from friends with the experience of living in a variety of different countries. “I have friends abroad, in Russia, France and the U.S.,” he said. “They live and work there, and they say that it’s financially secure. The most satisfied are those who work in Russia. In Russia I am ready to do any kind of job. I want to have a better life, and hope that I can live better there. Of course, my wish would be to have better living conditions in Armenia and stay here but I will go to Russia which is easier, although I would prefer the EU.”

This position underlines the importance of first-hand knowledge in making mobility decisions as opposed to media accounts or vague impressions, although the relative ease of entry in regard to Russia also comes into play; the EU is perceived as culturally more appealing but less likely to provide access to its labour markets. Russia does however have its detractors as a place for work. Among my interviewees I have Anna, a 28-year-old law graduate currently living in the U.S. Her objections to moving to Russia relate to its political reputation; she regards the country as ‘totalitarian’ and points out concerns related to the drop in the value of the Russian ruble, the annexation of Crimea, war in Georgia, selling weapons to Azerbaijan and the killing of an Armenian family in Gyumri. All of these factors create a negative impression of Russia for some Armenians.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> David Cairns and Marine Sargsyan, *Student and Graduate Mobility in Armenia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 38.

While Russia, in general, is not attractive enough for advanced Armenian youth, people are still concerned about Armenia's foreign policy direction, related mostly to the Karabakh issue, because Russia is Armenia's only military ally and a regional power in the South Caucasus. To illustrate this further, I discuss the experiences and paths of the interviewees in Armenia, Russia and Europe, locating them in a cultural identity framework which 'links an individual to a membership group that encompasses emotional ties, frameworks of thinking, and ways of behaving.'<sup>23</sup> Along with the nature of identity, this includes the active process of identification.<sup>24</sup>

### *Mobility Experience in the EU*

The interviewees who had experiences with Europe had more positive feedback. Most of them had a good experience, indicating that they were granted with wide opportunities to develop and grow personally and professionally, despite the fact that there was a factor of learning a new language, in contrast to Russia, where there was no language barrier. For example, Albina, a 35-year-old interviewee from France, mentioned the importance of mastering French, which was challenging, yet important for integration into French society and the labour market. However, she did not consider it as a barrier, but a path for professional and personal growth. In contrast to Albina, David A., a PhD student in the Czech Republic, had a different experience regarding language proficiency requirements. He started his experience of studying and working in Budapest, Hungary, seven years ago with a master's degree. It was very easy for him to connect with society and find a job afterwards. At the moment, he combines his research with full-time work in Brno. "It is not difficult to find a job in the Czech Republic for foreigners as the country needs highly-skilled migrants and there are many international companies here doing outsourcing," he said. He does not speak Czech or Hungarian, but it did not affect his ability to find a job as "the international

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<sup>23</sup> Nun Sussman, *Return Migration and Identity: A Global Phenomenon, a Hong Kong Case* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> Blum, *The Social Process*, p. 26; Sussman, *Return Migration and Identity*. A useful critical review of the literature on both concepts is Alejandro Grimson, 'Culture and Identity: Two Different Notions', *Social Identities*, 16: 1 (2010), pp. 66-77.

companies in the Czech Republic have a high demand for qualified English-speaking specialists.” He feels free and secure in Europe, well-integrated but not assimilated, and he thinks that despite Armenia's historical past with Europe, its relations with Russia are stronger and the Soviet period did indeed change society. It created ‘Soviet people’ and this mentality is inherited by many in Armenia, especially in less urban regions, while in the capital, people are more advanced, whether they are influenced by Russia or Europe.

Another positive example of integration into the local community was experienced by David B., a master's student at the Free University in Berlin. Born in Yerevan but raised in Moscow, he renounced his Russian citizenship and moved to Armenia to serve in the army after which he entered university in Germany. Living in Moscow for most of his life, he could not adjust to Russian society and culture, although he is fluent in Russian and even worked as an intern for governmental institutions after his university studies. However, he is still connected with Russia and frequently visits his family in Moscow. He had a great experience studying and working in Germany, where he witnessed rapid academic and professional growth. He considers himself to be a global citizen and wants to bring the best experience into Armenia. The positive change of the April events is the end of the 'one-party system' in Armenia, but David questions whether Nikol Pashinyan and his team can create a political system driven by the interests of the society and the state. He is very suspicious, and like the majority of the country, he can only hope for it.

A successful case is the academic and professional path of Armine B. She is a graduate of Cambridge University, currently studying for her PhD at Oslo University. Before moving to Norway, Armine B. was working at the European Parliament as a trainee. Although she is very patriotic and loves Armenia dearly, she still sees a lot of work to be done for change in society; yet, the country has definitely made major steps forward in the last decade, and there are hopes for the new government. Living in Europe, she feels very much connected to her homeland, willing to contribute with her expertise, but it will still be hard for her to reconnect with society and life in Armenia, which is very different from the European way of life. Here, I observe that my pro-

European respondents feel very comfortable living in Europe, which is very different from the Armenian environment but close to their personality. In short, my research suggests that many young Armenians in Europe are happy and feel integrated, while Armenians in Russia often experience emotional and cultural discomfort, which plays an important role in their decision to reconnect with the homeland and its culture.

### *A Glance from Overseas*

My American-based interviewees, Sona and Anna, are both from Yerevan, and were born in the USSR but moved to the U.S. to study, where they eventually settled down. They were however very nostalgic about Armenia and view the country's long-term historical background and cultural relations as being closer to Europe than to Russia. However, Anna has also stated that “we cannot ignore the 70 years of common history and relations with Russia are prioritised for many reasons.” Given the opportunity, she would prefer Europe to the U.S. because “life in America is tough,” she said. “Work and life balance is not good, it is really bad. Europeans have paid vacations, paid holidays – we have it in the States too, but compared to the European up to 25 days we get only 10. Education in Europe is free, there are low cost flights within the EU member states, life is more relaxed, and it is closer to Armenia.” As for Russia, it is very difficult for her to be unbiased after her life in the U.S., but there is something she appreciates most, which is respect, equality and liberty. There is no assimilation policy in the U.S., and she felt that you “can be Armenian and American at the same time, you will not be discriminated against for your origin, at least I was not.”

Meanwhile Sona’s emigration and destination choice was influenced by family and friends. As my American-Armenian interviewees are originally from Armenia and do not share the fate of other American-Armenians who moved to the United States because of the tragic events of the genocide of 1915, they did not think about or face losing or finding their identity. Yet, they acknowledge that the presence of a strong Armenian diaspora and community sustains the culture and traditions, and unites the nation, being very supportive in many areas.



### *Attachment to the country*

In the 1990s, Armenia faced a high rate of emigration, yet the formation of a new state actually strengthened Armenia-diaspora relations. Organizations such as Birthright Armenia are platforms for return-migration, and while there are many reasons why staying in Armenia is preferred, the most significant justification has been a strong attachment to family and homeland. One of the oldest interviewees, Artak – an active 'participant in the revolutionary movement' – was in such a position, who informed us that even if he had a job offer from abroad, whether from Russia or the U.S., he would refuse to leave Armenia as he sees many prospects for start-up business there, despite major challenges such as dealing with Armenian customs and unstable taxation. He also hopes that the new government will fight corruption and bribery, and that it will support the development of small and medium-sized business industries in Armenia. Another example of attachment to homeland is illustrated by Tatevik, a graduate of the College of Europe in Poland. She was firm in her decision to live, work and implement her knowledge and European experience in Armenia. Having studied Political Science at the American University of Armenia, she later obtained a second master's degree in European studies in Warsaw. "Education abroad, even foreign education in Armenia whether it is the American University or another foreign institution, does have an influence on our views," she said. "My AUA experience had a great impact on my personal, professional development and career orientation. Along with theoretical knowledge these universities train and prepare us for job market competitiveness, and make us more flexible, while national universities give only theoretical base." With regards to her position towards Russia and the EU, she observed that "the clash of East and West is very visible in Armenia, this is also conditioned by the current political situation, the country's relations with the European Union and Eurasian Economic Union. And this discourse East-West will always be on our agenda, on personal and political levels." She is someone who prioritises the Western world and European values, "which are closer to Armenia," she said. "We are at the crossroads and we carry it

all, and it is very individual where one sees herself/himself. In my case European culture and values are closer to me and living in Armenia doesn't distance me from the EU, even the opposite. There are many EU projects in Armenia I welcome and support that bring the country closer to the EU.” She gladly followed the events in Spring 2018, and was happy to see the unity of all Armenians around the globe. She firmly believes that the “diaspora is an unseparated part of Armenia [and] we must strengthen these ties, through different programmes, people-to-people connection and collaboration on a state level agenda.”

### *Post-Revolutionary Expectations*

Finally, the new generation of young Armenians has a strong free spirit that was demonstrated in Spring 2018, when Armenia celebrated a democratic triumph, united and encouraged by the youth. Many arrived in Yerevan to support the movement against the former president Serzh Sargsyan and the ruling Republican Party, among them my 21-year-old interviewee from Moscow. Most of my Armenian interviewees were active participants in the movement. Melina, from Yerevan State Linguistic University, was very active from the first day, “screaming and supporting Nikol Pashinyan, the leader of the revolution and current Prime Minister.” She felt revolutionary. In fact, she said “it was a peaceful march and hanging out in the city center, making barbecues or dancing on the streets to block the roads. It was great. Everything will be straightforward.” She believes in Nikol Pashinyan, ‘like everyone does,’ but there are some people who are suspicious, asking “what if he is a puppet of the Russian Empire. We have to wait and see what happens next.”

Kristina, who repatriated to Armenia in June, was following the news and events in both Russia and Armenia. “Russian media and people were astonished by the peaceful march for democracy in Armenia,” she said. “People in Russia were affected and made some attempts to protest against Putin, screaming ‘Putin go away! We want it like in Armenia!’ Well, of course it didn't work out in Russia and all demonstrators were imprisoned.”

Apparently, young people up to the age of 25 were more enthusiastic, while adults between 25 and 35 were more analytical and rational. For example, Anush, a PhD student at Yerevan State University was pro-revolutionary, yet was not affected enough by the events to make changes in her long-term plans for moving to Germany, where she sees more opportunities. An initial appraisal of the transcripts shows that only 13 out of 50 interviewees have definite plans to remain in Armenia, although this number will probably rise given the difficulty of finding appropriate opportunities abroad and the likelihood that some people will change their minds. Armine T., a graduate of Yerevan State Economic University, believes that recent political changes will have a positive impact. “Although it is too early to judge about the consequences,” she said In sum, 45 out of 50 respondents would see the April events as a positive change in Armenia's politics; the end of corrupt and de-facto one-Republican party rule that strongly tied Armenia both politically and economically to Russia.

“As someone who has definite pro-European orientation I have to highlight that Armenia’s security is not on the agenda of the EU-Armenia relations, and we saw what happened with Georgia in 2008 that was hoping and expecting military support from the West that didn't arrive, and it is still knocking NATO's door,” she said. “Security is a priority issue for everyone - humans, societies, countries and regions. Therefore, judging Armenian-Russian intergovernmental relations are easy, but living in the regional geopolitics of the South Caucasus is very complicated.”

To give a clearer picture of the overall mood in Armenia, I borrow and compare some data from the International Republican Institute, Center for Insights Survey Research project, which conducted a Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia<sup>25</sup> in August 2018 in eleven regions and surveyed 1,200 permanent residents of the Republic of Armenia. Thirty-nine percent of their respondents viewed the recent change in the Armenian government as a very positive change, and

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<sup>25</sup> The International Republican Institute, 'Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia', Center for Insights Survey Research, (2018), <[https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018.10.9\\_armenia\\_poll\\_presentation.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018.10.9_armenia_poll_presentation.pdf)> p. 3 [accessed 23 April 2019].

for 42 percent it was somehow positive as well, meaning that it was favored by 81 percent in total. Ninety percent of my respondents (45 out of 50) shared the same feeling. As for the economic relations with Russia and the EU, 84 percent of the IRI's respondents considered relations with Russia to be very important, while relations with the EU were significant for only 34 percent of respondents. While my interviewees would highlight strong political and economic ties with Russia, about 70 percent preferred to strengthen relations with the EU. It was however noticed that interviewees from both sides considered the country's relations on a state level with both Russia and the EU as quite good.

## **Conclusion**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the formation of independent states drastically changed society in Armenia and the world at large. A new generation of global citizens with feelings of strong ethnic belonging is growing in Armenia, despite sounding contradictory. The Russification policy in the Soviet Union that failed in Armenia has actually strengthened Armenia-diaspora ties, since ironically, there are more Armenians living outside Armenia than in the country itself. In fact, Russia, whether imperial Russia, soviet Russia or the Russian Federation, is a country that has always been led by cultural assimilation policy.<sup>26</sup> As Samuel Huntington remarks, in the post-Cold War world, culture became both a divisive and unifying force. What brings Armenia and Russia close to each other and partnership is common Christian identity, Armenia's security concern, and Russia's geographic proximity and imperial ambitions. Armenians, however, due to their strong and unified characteristics, rooted in family, language and faith, have been able to preserve their identity throughout history. On the other hand, what is similar between Armenia and Europe, is common ancient civilization. If Armenia's relations with Russia officially start from 1828, when eastern Armenia after the Russo-Persian war was ceded to Russia, then Armenia's

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<sup>26</sup> Ronald Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, The USSR and the Successor States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

history and relations with Europe date back to the times of the Roman and Byzantine Empires. Most recent research of the Armenian DNA concludes that Armenians have higher genetic affinity to Neolithic Europeans than other present-day Near Easterners, and that 29% of Armenian ancestry may originate from an ancestral population that is best represented by Neolithic Europeans.<sup>27</sup>

Without denying the common historical past with Russia since 1828, we must remember that Armenia's history is as old as Erebuni-Yerevan, founded in 782 BC, and Armenia with its geographical location and history is truly a focal point of east and west. The latter was also noted by one of my interviewees, according to whom 'Armenians as a nation have similarities with Middle Eastern culture, so we carry the mix of these three – European, post-Soviet and Middle Eastern.' Thus, the relations with the EU were characterised by historical, cultural and political-economic interests. Development and consolidation of Armenia's relations with European structures, and with the EU above all, was considered a foreign policy priority direction and the establishment of close relations with the EU serves Armenia's long-term interests.<sup>28</sup> However, in September 2013, Armenia's U-turn policy and retreat from the EU Association Agreement in favour of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union shocked many in Armenian society, the international community and even part of the Armenian political elite. In fact, Armenia's negotiations with Customs Union membership were conducted long before Armenia's agreement with the EU in 2013. Since 2003, Armenia was an observer country in Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union<sup>29</sup> – joining the club was a matter of time. The Association Agreement with the EU's Eastern Partnership countries was considered by Russia as a threat to its economic and political influence in its former satellite

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<sup>27</sup> Marc Haber, Massimo Mezzavilla, Yali Xue, David Comas, Paolo Gasparini, Pierre Zalloua and Chris Tyler-Smith, 'Genetic Evidence for an Origin of the Armenians from Bronze Age Mixing of Multiple Populations,' *European Journal of Human Genetics*, 24 (2016), pp. 931-936 (p. 931).

<sup>28</sup> Armenia Country Study Guide, Volume 1, Strategic Information and Developments, International Business Publications, USA, Washington DC: USA-Armenia, 2013 Edition, p. 131.

<sup>29</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, Armenia's Relations with the Russian Federation, Case 169, index 12, 01.01.2004-11.12.2006, number of pages 106. Справка, Евразийское экономическое сообщество, ЕвразЭС-ОДКБ: практическое взаимодействие, pp. 52-53.

countries. Using its hard power policy, Russia responded consistently. It brought to the table a Customs Union membership offer manipulating Armenia's most vulnerable political issue – the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. To avoid what happened with Ukraine, Armenia sacrificed the Association Agreement with the EU to keep the conflict frozen, because Russia is viewed as an unpredictable actor that initiates ethnic conflicts and hybrid wars to strengthen its presence and influence over regions and territories. The decision of Armenia's ruling party, however, was met with deep discontent in society, culminating in the parliamentary elections of 2018.

A generational change took place in Armenia. A new society, well aware of its civil rights, with a desire for democracy, was established. Once again, Armenians became united demanding rule of law and justice that eventually overthrew a de-facto one-party system, yet, relations with Russia remained strong at all levels. The relationship with the EU has been reformulated, as there is mutual interest and Armenia is targeted by the EU Eastern Partnership Program. The Association Agreement with the EU was replaced with an alternative – Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Program that did not contradict Armenia's commitments to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union membership. However, Russia's reputation in Armenia is dropping, and there is more critique and mistrust of Russia within society due to three main factors: firstly, the security deficit in the South Caucasus, secondly, manipulation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and thirdly, Russia's economic leverage in Armenia.

Meanwhile, the European preference of the new generation in Armenia is influenced by many factors: a good education, advanced labor market, social welfare, freedom of speech and democratic values, and an evaluation of an old historical past and identification with European civilization. Nevertheless, Armenia's politics with Europe can be described as a relation based on cultural diplomacy, political dialogue, democratization and development. The EU, therefore, prizes soft power politics, whereas taking into consideration Armenia's relations with its neighboring countries, it needs a military ally. Therefore, between two similar civilizations, political preference is given to the one who guarantees the country's security due to geographic proximity. Despite

Armenia's old history with Europe, religious and cultural affinity, new developments within the Armenian society, and its European orientation, geographical factors and security issues of all parties bring Armenia to political cooperation with the EU, and strategic military alliance with Russia. Also, despite negative associations with the former Soviet Union among the youth, Armenia's relationship with the Russian Federation remains strong in many respects. Russia is still regarded as the most prominent destination for economic migrants because of the accessible Russian labour market, visa-free regime, personal connections and family relations, and knowledge of the Russian language. Finally, it is very important to highlight that all interviewees, except one, had strong attachments to Armenia, thus demonstrating the significance of young Armenians' feelings of (re)connection with their homeland.

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