

New Europe College Yearbook 2010-2011



IONUȚ FLORIN BILIUȚĂ
DUNYA DENIZ ÇAKIR
ANA-MARIA GOILAV
MARIANA GOINA
SILVIU-RADIAN HARITON
SUSAN MBULA KILONZO
CRISTIAN NAE
THEODOR-CRISTIAN POPESCU
COSMIN GABRIEL RADU
KONRAD SIEKIERSKI
ANDREEA ȘTEFAN

Editor: Irina Vainovski-Mihai

Copyright – New Europe College
ISSN 1584-0298

New Europe College
Str. Plantelor 21
023971 Bucharest
Romania

www.nec.ro; e-mail: nec@nec.ro
Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10, Fax (+4) 021. 327.07.74



KONRAD SIEKIERSKI

Born in 1981, in Warsaw, Poland

Ph.D. candidate in the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, National
Academy of Sciences of Armenia and in the Institute for Eastern Studies,
Adam Mickiewicz University

Thesis: *Pilgrimage and Sacred Places in the Context of
Modern Armenian Culture*

Several articles on present-day religious situation in Armenia
and conference presentations

THE ARMENIAN DIASPORA IN ROMANIA: ROOTS, ROUTES, RE-CREATIONS

There are two kinds of Armenians in the world:
those who know it, and those who don't know it yet.

We have Armenians who are bigger Romanians than the Romanians,
we have Armenians who are bigger Hungarians than the Hungarians,
but we are short of Armenians who are good Armenians. This is our problem.

Introduction

This article describes the main organizational and socio-cultural features of the present-day Armenian diaspora in Romania, its relations with home and host countries, and its participation in the transnational Armenian diasporic network. It also offers a discussion of diasporic identity, showing its highly personalized, flexible and multi-layered character.

The analysis is based on a qualitative study conducted in Romania (March-July 2011), in Bucharest, Constanta, Cluj-Napoca, Dumbrăveni, Gherla and Miercurea-Ciuc. In a course of the fieldwork, thirty in-depth loosely structured interviews were recorded and backed by field notes from participation in a number of diaspora events and gatherings. Majority of conversations took place with Armenians actively involved in diasporic life, especially leaders of local communities. To balance these data, less engaged and selectively active persons, especially from a young generation were also interviewed. Another set of interviews was taken with activists of local NGOs specializing in ethnic and religious minorities in Romania, as well as with scholars from the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities. Participation in Armenian events included the feast of Saint Gregory the Illuminator in Gherla, a number of Sunday liturgies (both of Armenian Catholic and Armenian Apostolic Churches), elections held by the Union of Armenians in Romania, and commemoration of the Armenian genocide. Data, gathered during ethnographic fieldwork were

complemented by an analysis of written sources, particularly Armenian press published in Romania (*Ararat* and *Nor Ghiank* journals).

Diaspora: Theoretical Considerations

The term “diaspora” has a great career nowadays. It is a key to many doors, even to too many, as its critics say.¹ Today one can hear about an almost incalculable number of diasporas, not only ethno-national or religious², but also “queer diaspora”³, or “the sexual diaspora of older women”.⁴ As Paul Johnson puts it ironically “Suddenly, it appears, everyone is in diaspora.”⁵ Diaspora as a category of practice became highly evaluated; what earlier could be a stigma today is often not only proudly displayed, but also politically charged, and can serve as a trampoline to higher status, funds and positions. Meanwhile, as a descriptive-analytical term it carries today several interconnected meanings, including a migratory pattern, statistical ensemble of dispersed people, specific type of consciousness, and mode of cultural production.⁶ Some scholars perceive the proliferation of the concept of diaspora as a sign of our times that reflects important transformations of the contemporary world,⁷ such as a growing hybridity of identities and rising visibility of transnational networks. Others see, for better or worse, the diasporic order as an emerging alternative to a fading hegemony of the nation-state.⁸

One of the most discussed conceptualizations of diaspora has been formulated by William Safran, who has proposed that this term should be applied to

expatriate minority communities, whose members share several of following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific, original “center” to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another,

and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.⁹

This definition of diaspora owes its popularity not only to the fact that it, arguably, underlines many important features of the discussed phenomenon, but also to the fact that it is a grist for the scholars' mill, as it allows to raise numerous questions, discussions and critiques. For example, Stephane Dufoix points out that Safran's definition is a "vehicle for static thinking", which is characterized by: 1) "the illusion of essence" (the assumptions, according to which the name implies a real existence of thing); "the illusion of community" (the assumption that common characteristics of given people should result in common conscience); and "the illusion of continuity" (which obscures the possibility to examine the dynamic character of diaspora).¹⁰

In order to avoid Safran's "static thinking", Paul Johnson proposes to approach diaspora not as "a permanent state of being", but as "a series of interventions".¹¹ In his view, diasporic communities and cultures must be, at least in certain situations and on certain occasions, re-created ritually or discursively; and at least from time to time a given diasporic identity must be elevated over other possible affiliations.¹² The research on Armenian diaspora in Romania confirms that repetitive acts such as every-Sunday liturgy or every-year commemoration of the Armenian Genocide play a crucial role in the process of diaspora's re-creation. Furthermore, even expressing certain moods and intentions or planning something "for the sake of our community" or in order "to maintain our identity" can be as effective as real deeds. This observation is well illustrated by the fact that at the time of author's fieldwork it appeared as though "everything is just beginning" for the Romanian Armenian diaspora: new ideas regarding language courses and digitalization of archives were announced by the Armenian Union, while the Church just started the project on cataloguing old manuscripts and planned to organize the first summer school for Romanian Armenian youth. Furthermore, the idea of cyclical Armenian parties was initiated in Bucharest, the call for creating a community's "who is who" index was raised, and an opening of Romanian branch of the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund was announced.

Some scholars also point out that a more nuanced understanding of the character of the relationship between diaspora and homeland is needed: the one in which not only is the faraway center a source of meaning for the dispersed population, but equally important is the fact of separation.

James Clifford notes that even in the “classical” case of Jewish diaspora, the idea to come back to Israel is only a part of Jewish experience, which rivals with “principled ambivalence about physical return and attachment to land”.¹³ In more general terms, Johnson writes: “Diasporas are cultures that cross wide transmissive gaps and are also about such gaps. [...] Being “in diaspora” is best understood as the active engagement with, and evocation of, such gaps as a source of meaning.”¹⁴ In other words, the perceived distance (both in space and in time), which separates “here” from “there” is as much a constitutive feature of the diaspora condition as the links, which connect the two parts. As a result, being in diaspora is not only about creating affiliations, but also about securing a certain separation and giving room to partial identifications and selective invocations.

The Armenian diaspora’s notion(s) of homeland illustrate well a need for employing such a more nuanced approaches. Firstly, it includes not only an experience of (sometimes multiply) rediasporalization, but also an issue of where the “official homeland”, i.e. the post-Soviet Republic of Armenia, is placed on the scale of longing and symbolizing the “center”. Secondly, the “myth of return” has been challenged in last two decades by the very fact that actually almost no members of the Armenian diaspora worldwide decided to move to newly established country. As described later in this text, Armenia is invoked in many context by Armenians in Romania (see: Relations with Armenia and Armenian Diasporic Network), but very rarely the idea of permanent resettlement or even of obtaining second citizenship is considered as viable option.

Another concern may be raised regarding Safran’s idea of the alienation of diaspora members from the host society. Data, collected during author’s fieldwork, show that in general Armenians in Romania do not perceive their Armenianness as a factor that obstructs their participation in Romanian society. Moreover, some of the most engaged activists of diasporic organizations play also a key role in the Romanian political and cultural life (see: Relations with Host State and Society). Actually, concerns regarding alienation from and tension with the Romanian majority were expressed only by those Armenians, who, although they live in Romania, identify their host society as Hungarian, and thus share Hungarians’ feelings of segregation and discrimination.

Drawing on the above discussed approaches to studying diaspora, in next parts of this article selected characteristics of the Armenian presence in Romania will be discussed. Namely, (1) the location of the Armenian diaspora in the Romanian state and society, (2) its relations with Armenia

and with other Armenian diasporic communities, and (3) its self-image will be described. Firstly however, a short overview of historical and present-day Armenian life in diaspora should be given.

Armenia and Armenian Diaspora: an Overview

The Armenian history of migration and dispersion is one of the longest and most diverse, and Armenians are often listed among “classical” diaspora people together with Jews, Greeks, Chinese and Africans.¹⁵

Except for short periods, starting from the fifth century up until modern times, the power over the territory considered by Armenians their homeland¹⁶ was exercised by Byzantine, Persian, Arab, Ottoman, and Russians Empires. During all this time Armenians migrated – forcefully or willingly – to locations scattered in different parts of the world, establishing the tradition of communal life in various culturally alien settings. Furthermore, the only long-lasting state Armenians were able to create during the last one and a half millennium was the “diasporic” Kingdom of Cilicia (1080-1375), situated on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Interestingly, it was there that the first written articulation of the notion of Armenian dispersion appeared in a twelve-century encyclical of catholicos¹⁷ Nerses Shnorhali. He addressed his letter

[t]o all the faithful of the Armenian nation, those in the east who inhabit our homeland Armenia, those who emigrated to the regions in the west, and those in the middle lands who were taken among foreign peoples, and who for our sins are scattered in cities, castles, villages, and farms in every corner of the earth.¹⁸

In the history of Armenian mobility, certain waves of migration and centers of settlement were especially important. In the eleventh century, Turkish conquests pushed a great number of Armenians to the north – firstly to Crimea, and from there to the Polish Kingdom and to Moldova. In the seventeenth century another part of Armenian population was forcefully settled in Persian capital city of Isfahan, from where some of them migrated later to India. Another important center of diasporic life – the Armenian Catholic Mekhitarist Brotherhood – was established at the beginning of the eighteenth century in Venice. During the same century numerous communities emerged in Russia, and in the nineteenth century

at that time the most important city of Caucasus – Tiflis (Tbilisi) – was mainly inhabited by Armenians. Meanwhile, Armenians were a minority in “their” lands and the present-day territory of the Republic of Armenia was gradually re-populated by them only after it went under the control of the Russian Empire in 1828, and was included into the Soviet Union 90-some years later.

A new chapter in the history of the Armenian diaspora started after 1915, when some half million Armenians, who survived mass killings in Ottoman Empire, were dispersed around the world, establishing or joining already existing communities on all the continents. Over a time, the survivors and their descendants created the vibrant, mobile, highly-politicized and nationally-oriented core of the modern Armenian diasporic network. The constant recollection of past atrocities and struggle against ongoing Turkish denial of the genocide became new pillars of Armenian identity.

Later, important relocations within the Armenian diaspora took place firstly in 1940s, when some 100 thousand people answered the Soviet call to “return home” and came to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic; and then, mostly in the 1960s-1980s, when many Armenians from the Middle East migrated to the United States and other western countries. Finally, more than one million Armenians left Armenia since the 1970s; most of them after the Republic gained independence in 1991. Economic blockade, war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, and the earthquake which devastated the north-western part of the country caused labor migration headed mostly towards Russia, but also to North America and Europe. The most important “little Armenia” was established in the Los Angeles agglomeration, which started to be referred as the second largest Armenian city after Armenia’s capital of Yerevan.¹⁹

As a result of these migration processes, out of some 8 million Armenians worldwide, no more than 3 million live today in Armenia, followed by more than one and a half million in Russia, one million in the USA, about 400 thousand in France, and 300 thousand in Georgia. Significant in number, Armenian diasporic communities are also present in Argentina, Australia, Canada, Iran, Lebanon, Syria and Ukraine, while smaller clusters can be found in dozens of other countries around the globe.²⁰

History of the Armenian Diaspora in Romania

The history of Armenian settlement on the territory of modern Romania reflects an intricate character of Armenian migration and diasporic life, described in the previous chapter. Since medieval times until the nineteenth century Armenians in Romania were mostly merchants and craftsmen, often granted with special juridical, economical and religious status. From fourteenth–fifteenth century onward they dominated trade routes that ran through towns of Moldova and Bucovina. As Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga wrote: “The Principality of Moldavia was created through trade and the traders collaborated to the creation of state in Moldavia. In this way, the Armenians were, so to speak, founding fathers of Moldavia.”²¹ First Armenian churches on this territory were built in 14th century, and two centuries later one the rulers of Moldova – Ioan Vodă cel Cumplit – was also known as Ioan Armeanul (John the Armenian). In the towns of Wallachia, Armenians were present in a considerable number at least since the sixteenth century, and already in the seventeenth century an Armenian district existed in Bucharest.

In the seventeenth century a significant number of Armenians reached Transylvania, leaving Moldova devastated by continuous conflicts and turmoils. Over a time, they mostly concentrated in four locations – Gherla, Dumbrăveni, Gheorgheni and Frumoasa. This first town, known as Armenopolis, became a symbol of Armenian settlement to the region. As in Moldova, the Armenian presence in Transylvania was crucial for the local market. According to the words of a late-eighteenth – early-nineteenth century author, “[f]or the Transylvanian establishment the Greeks and Armenians are like pulse for the human body [...]. You can read on their faces whether the state is healthy or afflicted by disease”.²² Soon after settling down in Transylvania, Armenian bishop Oxendius Verzerescu accepted the union with Rome and established the Armenian Catholic Church. The conversion to Catholicism accelerated the process of Magyarization of Transylvanian Armenians:²³ a number of them even became Hungarian national heroes of 1848’s “Spring of the Peoples”, and many migrated to Hungary after Transylvania became a part of the Kingdom of Romania in 1918. Contrary to what happened after 1915 in Wallachia, genocide survivors, with the exception of a few families, did not settle in Transylvania, and thus local communities did not experience an influx of fresh blood that gave a new character to Armenian communities in southern part of the country.

Meanwhile, in the late-nineteenth – early-twentieth century Armenians living in Bucharest and other Romanian cities gave many prominent figures to Romanian artistic, intellectual and political life, among them Spiru Haret, Theodor Aman, Garabet Ibrăileanu, and Grigore Trancu-Iași. In the same period, a number of Armenian associations were created, schools opened and journals published. As already mentioned, this part of the Armenian diaspora in Romania was greatly influenced by Armenian migrants that came to the country as a result of the genocide of 1915. Romania, the first state that officially offered asylum to Armenian refugees, also accepted so called Nansen passports.²⁴ As a result, depending on the estimations, during the 1930s some 12,000-40,000 Armenians lived in the country.²⁵ In 1919 the Union of Armenians in Romania was established to help the refugees.

Later, the vibrant community's life was strongly affected by the outburst of the Second World War and the establishment of the communist regime in 1945. Gradually all Armenian organizations, except the Armenian Apostolic and Armenian Catholic Churches,²⁶ were closed down and public diasporic life to a large degree ceased to exist. In 1946-48 some three thousand former refugees took part in a repatriation campaign to Soviet Armenia. During the following decades, especially in the 1960s most of the Romanian Armenians left the country and joined their compatriots in the US and other western countries. As a result, the 1972 census gives a number of only 2342 Armenians in Romania.²⁷

Armenians in Romania Today

In last two decades official statistics show a continuous decrease in the number of people who declare Armenian nationality. According to the census of 1992 there were 1957 Armenians in Romania, ten years later this number dropped to 1708.²⁸ However, according to internal sources of the Union of Armenians in Romania, Armenian Apostolic Church and Armenian Catholic Church these numbers look quite different. For example, in the headquarters of the Union of Armenians in Bucharest they estimated in 2011 that there are some 1000 Armenians in Bucharest, 800 in Constanta, 300 in Gherla, 50 families in Iași, and 20 families in Pitești, Botoșani and Suceava. In turn, in some publications one can find a number of 7000 Armenians, according to the estimations delivered by the Union of Armenians.²⁹ The Armenian Apostolic priest from Bucharest

informed the author about 900 families in the capital, 200 families in Constanta, and 50-100 people in other towns under the jurisdiction of the Apostolic Church; while the priest representing the Armenian Catholic Church estimated the number of the followers of the Uniate rite as some 500 people. All these numbers, except for giving some orientation, and a lot of disorientation, highlight a crucial issue of who counts and who is counted. While results of official statistics restrict the choice to clear “either, or” options (only one ethnic/national affiliation can be declared), internal estimations reflect not only the very possible wish to “be more numerous”, but also a more flexible approach in which “both, and” options are possible. A telling example of such fluid and relational character of self-ascription, resulting in incoherent data, was given to the author by the newly appointed (in 2011) head of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Romania. After his arrival to the country, he was told that the Armenian community in a town of Babadag (south-eastern Romania) had vanished and only one person was still left, but after his call a dozen or so families declared their Armenianness.

According to the official statistics, in terms of mother tongue Armenians are, after Jews, linguistically most assimilated minority in Romania. In the census of 2002 out of 1780 Armenians, 40% declared Armenian as their mother tongue.³⁰ This percentage would certainly drop, if one would check the knowledge of language among the people counted as Armenians in the above mentioned more inclusive estimations. In Transylvania, Armenian was lost as the language of everyday communication already several generations ago, and today supposedly only two people still can speak it, one of them being a descendant of genocide survivors. In other places, the language is gradually disappearing nowadays – while many representatives of older generation still can speak, in the middle generation this skill is partly lost, and among youth the author met only one person speaking fluently, and several with basic or intermediate knowledge. In the time of research, only three local communities – in Bucharest, Constanta and Gherla – offered classes of Armenian, but lessons took place at best once a week, and they offered no more than studying the alphabet and basic vocabulary. In families, losing of language skills can be speeded up or slowed down by such factors as in which generation mixed marriages started, and how much influence on the education of children their grandparents have had. What is usually lost first is written language, spoken follows. The story told by one of the interviewees shows this process well:

I learned Armenian only at home, my grandma, my father, everybody except for my mother, who was Romanian, spoke Armenian, so I learned it, but this is not the best Armenian. [...]. I have two daughters, and I've tried to teach them Armenian, but I wasn't able to do it, because I was starting the phrase in Armenian and was finishing in Romanian [...]. When I was a child everybody in the family, except my mother was speaking Armenian, now I am the only one who speaks Armenian in my family, and all the others speak Romanian. My wife is Romanian. It is only one generation, but the situation has changed entirely.

The language and alphabet are gradually relegated from the communicational sphere to the symbolic domain, where their existence in forms of key phrases, distinctive sounds or graphic motifs, not comprehensiveness, is valued. This shifting in the character of the Armenian language can be traced in the diasporic "public sphere". On the one hand, when community affairs are discussed the language which is used is Romanian and speeches delivered in Armenian by the ambassador and the bishop are translated for the audience. On the other hand, rituals of the Apostolic Church are conducted in the old Armenian language, incomprehensible for participants, with only a minor presence of the Romanian language. In turn, in the Armenian Catholic Church, where the liturgy is served mostly in modern Hungarian, the difference between the Armenian and Roman Catholic rite is marked by the presence of Armenian spiritual hymns sung by the choir. The more solemn ceremony is celebrated, the more the "Armenianness" of the liturgy is exposed.³¹

Small in number, Armenian diaspora in Romania is internally diverse. Traditionally three distinctive groups are counted:³² (1) Moldovan Armenians, who were the first Armenian settlers on the territory of today's Romania, and whose sparse descendants live mostly in Botoșani, Bucharest, Iași, and Suceava; (2) Transylvanian Armenians, who are present in such cities and towns as Cluj-Napoca, Dumbrăveni, Gheorgheni, Gherla, Miercurea-Ciuc and Târgu Mureș; (3) post-genocidal Armenians who settled mostly in Southern and Eastern Romania (Bacău, Brăila, Bucharest, Constanta, Focșani, Galați, Iași, Pitești, etc.), and are today the dominant sub-group.

The most pronounced differentiation within these groups is built along the Romanian-Hungarian division. As already mentioned, Transylvanian Armenians were gradually Magyarized over last three centuries, but today the domination of Hungarian affiliations and sentiments is challenged by the growing presence of the Romanian population and, subsequently,

Romanian culture in the region. The role of an agent of Romanianness is also played, in a way, by the Union of Armenians. Armenians from Cluj-Napoca, Dumbrăveni and Gherla, where the Romanian population dominates, joined the Union and, despite still existing differences, have today closer ties with Bucharest than with Budapest. In turn, Armenians from Gheorgheni and Miercurea-Ciuc, who also today live in a predominantly Hungarian-speaking environment, have almost no connections with Romanian Armenians. Instead, they keep close ties with their Hungarian counterparts, especially with the organization that gathers their compatriots who migrate from Transylvania to Hungary. Interestingly, in this case Romanian-Hungarian divisions and animosities seem to prevail over common Armenian affiliation.

However, this is not the end of the story, as yet other subdivisions can be traced. Firstly, although a great wave of emigration from Armenia in the 1990s generally by-passed Romania, there are about 100-150 "Hayastantsi",³³ who settled down in the country in last twenty years, predominantly in Bucharest. They find occupation mostly in trade, and create a separate informal network based on extended families. They share with "old Armenians" the space of the church and adjacent Armenian club, but are not well integrated with the rest of community. Both groups keep a certain distance, usually explained by significant differences in mentality and cultural background. Secondly, somehow between these two groups a number of people are located, who came back to Romania in 1990s, after their families took part in the repatriation from Romania to Soviet Armenia some 50 years earlier. Finally, the Bucharest community was also joined in the last two decades by several Armenians who used to live in other diasporic settings. While their engagement in communal activities varies, the more active of them try to introduce some forms of diaspora activities they experienced in countries from where they arrived (for example singing or dancing "as Armenians do there").

As already mentioned, confessional organization of Armenians is divided into the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian Catholic Church. The first of them has in Romania a separate bishopric (with its head residing in Bucharest) and ten parishes in southern and eastern part of the country (Botoșani, Brăila, Bucharest, Constanta, Galați, Fokșani, Iași, Pitești, Suceava, Târgu Ocna), served by four priests.

The Armenian Catholic Church is organized under the name of "Ordinariate for the Faithful of the Eastern Rite in Romania" and is administrated by the Catholic bishop of Alba Iulia. It is today in a rather

pitiful state: the last priest with Armenian roots and educated in the seminary of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate in Lebanon left the priesthood several years ago, and today the whole Ordinariate is reduced to one priest of Hungarian origin. He resides in Gherla and except for serving the local community, he visits once a month Armenians in Cluj and about once a year in Dumbrăveni, Gheorgheni and Frumoasa.

The Church is, similarly to what is reported regarding the Armenian diaspora in other countries, a highly esteemed institution that plays a crucial role not so much because of its religious message, but rather as a symbol of national identity and a focal point of the community.³⁴ In Bucharest, many events are scheduled to take place just after the liturgy, and even if on a given Sunday no organized activities are to take place, community members gather after the service for a chat and coffee. Actually many of them even do not attend the liturgy, or enter the church only to light a candle when the service is just about to finish. As one of the interviewees said:

I am not a religious man, but I think the Church plays important role in bringing the community together. A big part of us come to the Church not for religious reasons, but to get together, to talk. Probably if the Church did not exist we would not gather so often, but now there is a reason to come every week.

Sunday masses in which the author participated in Bucharest were attended by some fifty – one hundred fifty people, the last number being on Easter. In Constanta the liturgy was attended by twenty people, including the choir. Two Armenian Catholic masses, in Gherla and Cluj, were attended by, respectively, fifty and five people; the solemn liturgy on the feast of Saint Gregory the Illuminator gathered some three hundred participants.

The ecclesiastic calendar determines to a large extent the rhythm of community life and religious feasts give an occasion to experience, practice and publicly express Armenianness. As one Armenian Catholic from Gheorgheni puts it, "We are Hungarians during weekdays and Armenians on weekends, in the church."³⁵ The most important feasts mark the heights of diaspora activities and combine elements of religious service, community gathering, family event, and leisure. For the followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church the main annual gathering takes place in the middle of August in the sixteenth-century monastery of Hagigadar in Suceava on the occasion of the feast of the Assumption of the Holy

Mother of God. For Armenian Catholics the most important celebration is the feast of Saint Gregory the Illuminator in Gherla in the end of June – beginning of July.

Respectively, church buildings are the most important landmarks of Armenian presence in Romania, even if they are usually built in local architectural style, with only some secondary distinctive elements. The only exception from this rule is the cathedral in Bucharest, which clearly resembles the cathedral in Ejmiatsin (Armenia) – the spiritual center of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Temples create the geography of Armenian diaspora, marking the space of host land with meaningful places. As Paul Johnson shows, such places are created through three interconnected strategies of “hooking” (attaching familiar objects and practices into new space), “telescoping” (condensation of these objects and practices) and “additivity” (transformation of familiar objects and practices under the influence of the surrounding culture).³⁶

Regarding social organizations that gather Armenians in Romania, the most extensive structure belongs to the Union of Armenians in Romania. Besides, several local Armenian cultural organizations and foundations operate in Transylvania.³⁷ The Union of Armenians continues the traditions of the pre-communist organization of the same name, and was established in 1991 in Bucharest. Today, it has also its branches in several locations: Bacău, Botoșani, Cluj-Napoca, Constanta, Dumbrăveni Galați, Gherla, Fokșani Iași, Pitești, and Suceava. In Bucharest, the Union runs a publishing house “Ararat”³⁸ and the “Mikasian-Kesisian” Sunday school, which has two teachers and two groups – of Western and Eastern Armenian. Two journals – “Ararat” and “Nor Ghiank” (“New Life”) – are published, respectively, in Romanian and Armenian languages. Some years ago cyclical lectures were organized, and until recently a dancing group existed. The Union organizes annual commemorations of the Armenian genocide on 24 of April, as well as other communal events.

Relations with Host State and Society

As Denise Aghanian observes, Armenians living abroad “tend to be demographic ghosts”.³⁹ The status of Armenians in Romania supports this reflection: they generally have a very good knowledge of the local language and culture, lack easy recognizable markers of ethno-religious belonging and are dispersed in urban settings.⁴⁰ Often, the only marks of

distinction are their names and surnames, especially for those Armenians who settled in Romania after the genocide and after the fall of the USSR. The representatives of earlier waves of migration are less recognizable in this respect, especially in Transylvania, where they carry Hungarian-like (although also distinctive) family names.

Many Armenians are today active members of Romanian political, cultural, and scientific life. The list of names is long, but probably the figure of Varuzhan Voskanyan is the most telling example of the Armenian engagement in the host society, and, in more general terms, of the hybrid character of diasporic identity. The descendant of genocide survivors, he is both the president of the Union of Armenians in Romania and one of the prominent figures of the center-right National Liberal Party. In 2007-2008 he served as a Minister of Economy and Commerce and Minister of Economy and Finance. As a poet and novelist, he is a vice-president of the Writers' Union of Romania, and gained fame with his "Book of Whispers", an account of Armenians' painful fate in the twentieth century. As a leader of the Armenian community he criticized Romania's president for his statement that Nagorno-Karabakh should be returned to Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, as a Romanian politician he frequently puts forward nationalistic opinions, rejecting the independence of the Republic of Moldova, and describing himself as "incurable unionist".

In terms of relations with the state apparatus, Armenians are one of nineteen ethno-national minorities officially recognized by Romanian authorities and subjected to corresponding legal regulations. According to these regulations, the association representing a given minority, which obtains the highest number of votes during parliamentary elections, acquires one place in the lower house of the parliament.⁴¹ The same organization receives also significant subsidies from the state budget, intended to cover the expenses of its activities.⁴² In practice, such state policy generally supports the situation in which a given minority has one leading organization. In this respect the case of the Armenian diaspora in Romania is quite unique compared with Armenian diasporas in many other countries, where diasporic structures are more decentralized and fragmented.

The status of recognized minority also gives Armenians access to public media, as well as the right to run its own educational institutions. However, as one of the leaders of the Union admitted, they use these opportunities only to a small extent: education is limited to Sunday school and the only permanent Armenian broadcast is a weekly 20-minute program in the local radio station in Constanta.

The Armenian diaspora, small and well integrated into the host society, is not a target for any specific state or NGO initiatives, usually being included only into general programs directed towards all nineteen ethnic minorities. For example, information about the Armenian presence in the country was included in the textbook prepared for Romanian elementary schools by the Ethnocultural Diversity Resource Center. Representatives of the Armenian associations also participate regularly in the all-minorities' cultural events, such as ProEtnica Festival in the town of Sighisoara.

Relations with Armenia and Armenian Diasporic Network

For most Armenians in Romania, Armenia seems to be a rather distant land and their knowledge about its history and current situation is quite low. However, its picture can be evoked in number of affective and cognitive strategies. It may be seen as a source of "genuine culture", when "traditional Armenian costumes" are sewn and "traditional Armenian dances" staged; or of "genuine taste", when Armenian brandy or cold meat are praised. It may serve as a suitable and understandable point of reference for comparison with local experience, as for example in the case of one interviewee from Hungarian populated part of Transylvania who drew a parallel between the situation of Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh and Hungarians in Romania. It may be seen as a place where one can experience his Armenianness, and where traditions and customs, which differ from Romanian social norms, are commonly recognized and practiced. But it may also be perceived as a backward country with low standards of living, a comparison to which helps to appreciate one's own conditions and opportunities in the place of residence.

Interestingly, Armenia is also quite often associated with the history of repatriation of 1946-1948 and the great hardships that Armenians suffered after reaching their new Soviet "homeland". Tragicomic anecdotes about those days are still remembered and recalled as authentic accounts from a family's past:

There were many brothers, sisters, and relatives in the family of my father and one of them said "I will go." They made a meeting of the whole family, with old members of the family and he was the only one who said "I will go there." The oldest person in the family said "Ok, you go, and send us a picture of yourself. If the situation is good you should be standing, and

we will go there too. If something is wrong, send a picture on which you are sitting on a chair." And after one year the letter came, all the family gathered together, they opened the envelope, took the picture out, and saw him lying down on the floor...

Although trips from Romania to Armenia are not frequent, and visiting historical Armenian lands in today's eastern Turkey is even more unusual, there is a growing number of programs targeted on Armenian youth that give an opportunity to travel to Armenia. Some of these programs, established by various Armenian pan-diasporic foundations as well as by the recently created Ministry of Diaspora of the Republic of Armenia, have purely touristic and educational goals, others offer longer stays and voluntary work. For example, in summer 2011 a group of twelve Armenian youngsters went to Armenia thanks to Ministry of Diaspora's initiative called "Ari Tun" (Come Home). The Union of Armenians, which controls and coordinates participation in such programs, has also good contacts with the Mekhitarist Brotherhood in Venice, where Armenian youth take part in language summer courses.

Interestingly, outside of the country two organizations of Romanian Armenians exist: one in Armenia, which gather 1946-1948 repatriates and their descendants; and the other one, called "Raffi", which was established in Los Angeles by Armenians who left Romania starting from the 1960s. While the connections between these organizations and their compatriots in Romania are scarce, some Armenians who migrated to the US occasionally pay visits to Romania, and recently a group of them sponsored the renovation of the Hagigadar monastery.

The transnational and nationwide organization par excellence, which connects, at least symbolically, Armenians in dozens of countries around the world is the Armenian Apostolic Church. Such a character of the Church is affirmed by its ritual uniformity and fidelity to the old Armenian language, as well as by invocations of the distant spiritual center and ecclesiastic hierarchy, made during every liturgy. The transnational character of the Apostolic Church is also represented today in Romania by activities of the bishop Datev Hagopian, who (being himself born in Iraq and serving previously the Armenian community in Holland) launched since 2011 a number of initiatives aimed to stretch beyond the borders of Romania and reach both Armenia and other Armenian diasporic communities.

The Self-Picture of the Armenian Diaspora

In addition to embedding themselves, in one or another way, in a common Armenian narration of the first Christian nation endowed with a rich culture, glorious past and unique linguistic tradition, but also tragically experienced by persecutions, culminating with the genocide of 1915⁴³, Armenians in Romania perceive the history of their community as an important contribution to Romanian or Hungarian culture. Their involvement in local affairs – be it thanks to trade networks and financial resources, artistic skills, scientific achievements or political activities – is proudly presented and constitutes one of the most important elements of diasporic identity. As one of the interviewees said: We have Armenians, who are bigger Romanians than the Romanians, we have Armenians, who are bigger Hungarians than the Hungarians...

However, he also adds: "...but we are short of Armenians who are good Armenians. This is our problem." By this last statement he expressed a view, shared by many local Armenians, that due to a progressive assimilation and insufficient engagement in diasporic life, Armenians are doomed to extinction in Romania. Such concerns are often pronounced despite of the fact that a certain revival of the community, sometimes referred to as "neo-Armenianism",⁴⁴ attracted in the last two decades a significant number of people, who "rediscovered their Armenian roots". Fears persist due to the fact that "neo-Armenianism" seems to be predominantly an experience of the older and middle generations who grew up in socialist times and who, after the fall of Ceausescu's regime, have been stimulated by the new freedom of expression, action and affiliation. The younger generation is often perceived as lacking an interest in the community's affairs and thus the problem of continuity and succession is expressed.

The fear of extinction prods some diaspora members to undertake initiatives aimed at preserving and passing down the memory about the Armenian heritage in Romania. A good example of such initiatives is the recently established "Museum Collection of Transylvanian Armenians" in Dumbrăveni. As its creator states:

We have some forty-five people with Armenian roots here, and I know that over a time this community will be smaller and smaller, and it will be assimilated. So this museum was made in order not to forget who built this town. It was my intention when I started this project.

Interestingly, the leitmotiv of the exhibition in Dumbrăveni is a perfect example of how a theorization of diaspora can be applied in practice. Far from major present-day concerns of the community, the museum's flier articulates Armenian diasporic experience in Romania in a manner that seems to be directly taken from diaspora studies textbooks:

The collection comprises memories and recollections symbolically gathered in the luggage that accompanied Armenians on their way to Transylvania. [...] The display suggests the transitory state between "arrival" and "departure". Trunks in the three rooms evoke packing and unpacking, the stage between setting out and abandonment and exile.

Conclusions

Ways of feeling Armenian in Romania and of experiencing and expressing one's Armenianness can be very different. Some may be active members of the community, while others keep only loose contacts. For some it is a source of inspiration for their professional activities, as for example for the film-maker, architect and art historian, interviewed in the course of author's fieldwork. Others may collect Armenian artifacts, or just set up their smartphones to follow the weather in Yerevan. For some, their Armenianness is a "natural" consequence of their upbringing, however for many it is something which at a certain moment "came into their lives" and changed their identity.

All these point to the profoundly symbolic character of the Armenian diaspora in Romania, which lacks to a large extent most of the "objective" boundaries, for example distinct language of everyday communication, specific occupation, or common place of settlement.⁴⁵ Here, even such "obvious" criteria as ethnic belonging often require much conscious symbolization, especially when one has to (and most of author's interviewees have had to) deal with his or her mixed descent.

Finally, it can be said that dynamic and hybrid character of diasporic identity and culture, together with the limited size of the Armenian diaspora in Romania, allows one to grasp more easily what may be blurred in the case of more "static" social entities: that the social world is not something imposed on an individual, but it is a fabric, woven through individual and group strategies and commitments. Diasporas' fabrics are their roots and routes, which have to be bound anew time and again in order to re-create meaningful patterns and motifs.



Illustration 1: The Armenian Cathedral in Bucharest on the day of the commemoration of the Armenian Genocide.



Illustration 2: Car plate with the word “Hay”, which in Armenian language means “Armenian”.



Illustration 3: “The Museum Collection of Transylvanian Armenians” in Dumbraveni.



Illustration 4: The feast of Saint Gregory the Illuminator in Gherla.



Illustration 5: The pilgrimage to Hagigadar Monastery on the feast of the Assumption of the Holy Mother of God.



Illustration 6: The day before the pilgrimage to Hagigadar Armenians gather to prepare festive meal.

NOTES

- ¹ S. Dufoix, *Diasporas*, University of California Press, 2008, p.33.
- ² See for example: M. Ember, C. Ember, I. Skoggard (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Diasporas. Immigrant and Refugee Cultures around The World*. Volume I, Overviews and Topics, Springer, 2005.
- ³ See for example: C. Patton, B. Sanchez-Eppler (ed.), *Queer Diasporas*, Duke University Press, 2000; J. K. Puar "The Turban is Not a Hat" *Queer Diaspora and Practices of Profiling*, *Sikh Formations*, 4 (1) 2008, pp.47-91.
- ⁴ P. Ch. Johnson, *Diaspora Conversion. Black Carib Religion and the Recovery of Africa*, University of California Press, 2007, p.30.
- ⁵ P. Ch. Johnson, *Diaspora Conversion...*, p.30.
- ⁶ S. Dufoix, *Diasporas...*, p.54-55; S. Vertovec, "Three Meanings of "Diaspora", Exemplified among South Asian Religions", *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 6 (3) 1997, p.277-299.
- ⁷ See for example: S. Dufoix, *Diasporas...*, p. 29.
- ⁸ "Budushevo nie sushestvuet. Sociolog i filosof Zigmunt Bauman o prevrashenii chelovechestva v arhipelag diaspor", *Ogoniok* 5178 (19) 2011, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1637429>, entered 17.06.2011; J. Clifford, *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Harvard University Press, 1997, pp.273-277.
- ⁹ W. Safran, "Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return", *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 1 (1) 1991, p.83-84.
- ¹⁰ S. Dufoix, *Diasporas...*, p.55-56.
- ¹¹ *Ibidem*, p.36-37.
- ¹² *Ibidem*, p.38.
- ¹³ J. Clifford, *Routes...*, p.248.
- ¹⁴ P. Ch. Johnson, *Diaspora Conversion...*, p.35, 48.
- ¹⁵ S. Dufoix, *Diasporas...*; p.5-15, 38-53; W. Safran, *Diaspora in...*, p.84-90.
- ¹⁶ It counts about 180 thousand square kilometers, with its borders on the Pontus mountains in the north-west, the Kura river in the north-east, Lake Urmia in the south-east, Upper Mesopotamia in the south, and the upper Euphrates Valley in the west. The present-day Republic of Armenia, established in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union, and limited to 30 thousand square kilometers, is located in the north-eastern part of this territory (Kh. Toloyan, "Armenian Diaspora", in: M. Ember, C. Ember, I. Skoggard (ed.), *Encyclopedia of...*, p.36). Additionally, as a result of Armenian-Azerbaijani war in 1991-1994, Armenian populated and controlled but internationally unrecognized Republic of Nagorno Karabakh was established on the territory of 12 thousand square kilometers along south-eastern borders of Armenia.
- ¹⁷ Catholicos is the Head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, an autocephalous church, one of the Oriental Orthodox churches.
- ¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p.37.

- ¹⁹ More on historical and present developments of Armenian migration, see: D. Aghanian, *The Armenian Diaspora...*, p.73-120; V. Diatov, E. Melkonian, *Armianskaya Diaspora: Ocherki Sociokulturnoy Tipologii*, Caucasus Institute, 2009.; Kh. Toloyan, *Armenian Diaspora...*
- ²⁰ These numbers vary significantly, depending on sources. Estimations, which I give, are average numbers from following sources: V. Diatov, E. Melkonian, *Armianskaya Diaspora...*, p.36; S. Dufoix, *Diasporas...* p.53; Kh. Toloyan, *Armenian Diaspora...*, p.45.
- ²¹ As quoted in: J. Pal, *Armenians in Transylvania*, Romanian Cultural Institute, 2005, p.88.
- ²² As quoted in: *ibidem*, p.161.
- ²³ The history of the changing socio-demographical and political situation of Transylvania is too complicated to describe it here in detail. It should be sufficient to say that until this region became a part of Romania after the First World War, it was since the Middle Ages ruled (with different degrees of autonomy) by Hungarian authorities, and the Hungarian population enjoyed a privileged status. On the history of Transylvanian Armenian integration into the Hungarian society and culture see: J. Pal, "Armenian Image – Armenian Identity – Assimilation of the Transylvanian Armenians in the 18th and 19th Centuries", in: Agnieszka Barszczewska (ed.), *Integrating Minorities: Traditional Communities and Modernization*, Editura ISPMN, 2011, pp.13-32.
- ²⁴ Introduced in 1921 on the initiative of Fridtjof Nansen – Norwegian explorer, scientist and human rights activists – the Nansen passport was a document designed for refugees and stateless people.
- ²⁵ This first number is taken from I. Scurtu, I. Dordea (ed.), *Minoritățile Naționale din România 1925-1931*, Arhivele Naționale ale României, 1996, p. 465; the latter from L. Stacescu's article *Armenians in Romania*, http://www.personal.ceu.hu/students/02/Leon_Stacescu/rh.htm, entered 12.04.2011.
- ²⁶ However, the latter has been directly subordinated to the local Roman Catholic hierarchy in order to avoid the fate of Greek Catholic Church in Romania disbanded by the Communists.
- ²⁷ For a more detailed description of Armenian history in Romania see: J. Pal, *Armenians in...*; L. Stacescu, *Armenians in...*
- ²⁸ I. Veress, "Strategiile de Reproducere Culturală ale Minorități Armene din România", *RIRNM Working Paper* no. 33, 2010, http://www.ispmn.gov.ro/uploads/ISPMN_33_x_to%20web.pdf, entered 05.06.2011.
- ²⁹ Third Report Submitted by Romania Pursuant to Article 25, Paragraph 1 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2011 http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_FCNMdocs/PDF_3rd_SR_Romania_en.pdf, entered 20.05.2011, p.23.
- ³⁰ I. Horváth, *Minorities, Minority Protection in Romania*, unpublished paper.

- 31 During the celebration of the feast of Saint Gregory the Illuminator in Gherla even the Armenian anthem is incorporated into the liturgy.
- 32 See for example: I. Veress, "Strategii de reproducere..."; Report Submitted by Romania Pursuant to Article 25, Paragraph 1 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 1999, http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_FCNMdocs/PDF_1st_SR_Romania_en.pdf, entered 05.06. 2011.
- 33 The term "Hayastantsi" denotes Armenians who live in Armenia (Hayastan) or who recently emigrated from the country.
- 34 D. Aghanian, *The Armenian Diaspora: Cohesion and Fracture*, University Press of America, 2007 , p.152-158.
- 35 K. Kali, "Vasárnapiörmények – valami a pozicionálisidentitásról", in: S. Óze, B. Kovács (ed.), *Örmény diaszpóra a Kárpát-medencében II.*Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem, 2007.
- 36 P. Ch. Johnson, *Diaspora Conversion...*, p.55.
- 37 The list of Armenian organizations registered in Romania can be found on the website of the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities: <http://www.adatbank.ro/regio/ispmn/institutii/?oldal=orgMinIarmeană>, entered 22.05.2011.
- 38 During last twenty years it published some 150 titles.
- 39 D. Aghanian, *The Armenian Diaspora...*, p.4.
- 40 Interestingly, a process of "metropolization" of Armenians in Romania can be observed, as they generally move from smaller towns to bigger urban centers – for example from the towns of Transylvania to Hungary's capital of Budapest, and within Transylvania from Frumoasa to Miercurea Ciuc (this process is already accomplished), and from Gherla to Cluj-Napoca; to Romania's capital city of Bucharest Armenians move from towns of southern and eastern provinces of the country.
- 41 With the exception of the Hungarian party, which is able to pass the 5% threshold and thus receive a bigger number of seats.
- 42 I. Horváth, "Facilitating Conflict Transformation: Implementation of the Recommendations of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities to Romania, 1993-2001", http://www.core-hamburg.de/documents/34_CORE_Working_Paper_8.pdf, entered 12.07.2011.
- 43 D. Aghanian, *The Armenian...*; I. Veress, *Strategiile de Reproducere...*
- 44 J. Pal, *Armenians in...*, p.158
- 45 More on the issue of the symbolic character of the community, see: A. P. Cohen. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, Routledge, 2007.