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## **Diaspora Identity and a New Generation: Armenian Diaspora Youth on the Genocide and the Karabakh War**

### **Abstract**

In this paper, we explore the role of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Armenian genocide and the unresolved Karabakh conflict of the 1990s in identity among the new generation of Armenian diaspora – those who grew up after the establishment of the independent Armenian state in 1991. We draw on original interviews with diasporic youth in France, the United Kingdom and Russia – diasporas which were largely built in the aftermath of the genocide and the Karabakh war. Diaspora youth relate to these events through transmitted collective memories, but also reconnect with the distant homeland's past and present in new ways as they engage with new possibilities of transnational digital communication and mobility. Their experiences of identity shed light on how the new generation of diasporic Armenians defines itself in relation to the past; how this past is (re)made present in their interpretations of the Karabakh conflict and in everyday behaviors; and how diasporic youth experience the dilemmas of 'moving on' from traumatic narratives that for a long time have been seen as foundational to their identity.

**Keywords:** diaspora, Armenia, Karabakh, identity, generation, social media

### **Introduction**

The change of generations, particularly for diasporas, is frequently seen as both a threat and an opportunity. Expectations of moving forward on a path of healing and reconciliation in long-term conflicts, liberalization of cultural values, and the hopes of a future return are closely intertwined with fears of young people's disrespect for the past, loss of cultural heritage and memory, further distancing from homeland, and the blurring of identity. Diasporic communities, often founded on shared narratives of traumatic historical experiences, are therefore engaged in a paradoxical relationship with change: their past determines the present, but their future largely depends on how the new generations engage with both. This poses the question of whether new generations of diasporas can "*move on*" – re-narrate in new ways, de-prioritize or altogether change traumatic narratives that for a long time have been seen as foundational to diasporic identity – without losing their sense of unity.

In this paper, we explore the accounts of the new generation of the Armenian diaspora, whose experience of the past is distinct from older generations in three ways. First, they have grown up in the presence of a nation-state which could be considered homeland<sup>1</sup>, as the Republic of Armenia gained independence in 1991 and subsequently won the war against Azerbaijan, effectively securing control over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Second, this generation is mostly too young to remember this war or witnessed it from a distance, and therefore must rely on trans-generational transmission of memories and mediated representations to make sense of it. Finally, the new generation can engage in new ways of

relating to the homeland's past and present, including digital media and multiple sponsored opportunities for the diaspora youth to visit the independent Armenian state.

The focus of this article is on the role of two major historical events in the identity of Armenian diaspora youth in these dynamic contexts: the Armenian genocide of 1915<sup>2</sup> which is widely seen as the defining moment for the Armenian diasporas (particularly in the West), and the currently unresolved Karabakh conflict<sup>3</sup>, the regular escalations of which stimulate diasporic youth to (re)define their relationship with the homeland and their sense of identity. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of “postmemory” (Hirsch 2012) and “past presencing” (Macdonald 2013), we explore how the new generation negotiates their identity in relation to these critical events. We reveal the dilemmas that the diasporic youth are experiencing, particularly how their increasing desire to “move on” from the traumatic past and re-define diasporic Armenian-ness is held back by the often-implicit presence and weight of this past. This dilemma is deepened by the fact that young diasporic Armenians are negotiating their identity in an increasingly digital world, which offers new ways of re-connecting with the homeland and with diaspora members. The internet provides space for diasporic mobilization as it brings the distant homeland close and aids activism for genocide recognition; but presents space for contestation too, as it leads the diasporic youth to engage with the Karabakh conflict in a new and ambivalent way and facilitates alternative narratives of identity.

### **Diaspora identity, past traumas and generational change**

The last decades have seen a gradual turn towards constructivist explanations of diaspora identity, as “imagined transnational communities” (Redclift 2017, 504). This turn follows the broader scholarship on “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) and the understanding of national, ethnic, and other “large groups” as constructed – in other words, held together, experienced and performed through selectively chosen narratives and constantly (re)negotiated referents of identity that distinguish group membership against otherness (Volkan 1988). Diasporas are dispersed communities that share space with a host society but are simultaneously oriented towards a distant homeland (Brubaker 2005), and this makes elements that constitute diaspora identity and its boundary particularly important. Diasporic belonging involves continuous construction of identity in both space and time, as its members constantly negotiate belonging with homeland and host states (Cavoukian 2013; Tölölyan 2007) and relate to the diasporic community at large and to the distant homeland through imagining (Axel 2002; Walle 2013; Tsagarousianou 2004).

Diasporic identity can therefore be described as a fluid rather than fixed self-understanding which is constructed, reproduced, and transmitted across generations and spaces (Abramson 2017). As a process rather than a bounded entity, diasporas unite around collective and (re)negotiated narratives of sameness and the homeland (Mavroudi 2007). Mavroudi puts forward the notion of diaspora as a flexible process in which displaced people negotiate visions of community and homeland that, for political and cultural reasons, are represented as foundational to diasporic identity. Shared historical memories, cultural mediums, and symbols

are central to this process as “different persons must be able to nourish their imagination from the same source” (Boltanski 1999, 50). Diasporic identity is “always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (Hall 1990, 226), as its coherent and continuous biography is rooted in narratives that establish the spatio-temporal parameters of the community’s existence (Berenskoetter 2014). Historical narratives and collective memories underlie diasporic notions of loss or the regaining of homeland, return, and more generally, belonging. Diasporas become seen as (re)created through shared imagination and collective memory (Alexander 2013; Ziemer 2010), including through the revival of shared historical experience in imagining their homeland (Wilcock 2018).

Collective memory, however, is distinct from the understanding of history as a more accurate, albeit elite-produced, factology of the past (see Macdonald 2013). Since the introduction of collective memory as a concept by Halbwachs (1950) to denote people’s identification with historical events as if they were personal experiences and the role of social groups in creating solidarity through remembering, the selective and subjective aspects of collective memory have been emphasized. Volkan (1988) suggests that collective memories consist of “chosen glories” and “chosen traumas” - shared, selected, and subjective representations of historical events and figures, which maintain the community’s sense of self. They become central to the group’s identity and unite its members through feelings of pride, humiliation or mourning. The interpretation and remembering of subsequent events involve relating them to these collectively shared referents from the past. Collective memories therefore help communities unite through an “imprecise process of imagination” (Campbell 1998, 91).

For diasporas, the past is widely seen as defining their present as many of them trace their dispersion and sense of collective identity to traumatic events and narratives of loss. For the Armenian diaspora, the genocide of 1915 is widely recognised as the defining and foundational narrative (Kasbarian 2018; Laycock 2016) that explains its coming into being, as well as its trajectory in time and space. And yet, remembrance of the “chosen trauma” is a past of an “ahistorical kind” (Redclift 2017) as it becomes reworked for the present and can gain new meanings (Soysal 2000). Macdonald (2013) aptly describes this as “*past presencing*”, or how the past is present or is made present through experience, representation, performance and imagining. “Past presencing” suggests that identities are rooted not simply in sharing a connection to a common history and remembering past events, but in the continuous and even implicit re-purposing and re-making of their meaning in the present. In the case of the Armenian diaspora and its relationship with traumatic memories of the past, “past presencing” can be observed in the modern-day mentality of victimhood (Ziemer 2010) and survival against ever-present threats (Laycock 2016; Panossian 2002), which, as we shall demonstrate, permeates diasporic conceptions of identity, evaluation of subsequent events, and everyday behaviours.

“Past presencing” can also be observed in diaspora consolidation in a host state, as well as in its mobilization towards the homeland. Mavroudi (2018) defines diaspora mobilization as helping the homeland in material ways (for example, through activism or acts of charity); however, multiple layers of diaspora identity and mobilization need to be recognised (Redclift 2017). Diaspora mobilization is often connected to narratives of (in)security and crises in the

homeland; although not all such crises automatically lead to diaspora mobilization, which is often hampered by uncertainty over how to mobilize and issues of trust and corruption in the homeland (Koinova 2018; Mavroudi 2018). Pattie (1999) suggests that the memory of the genocide continues to create a sense of responsibility to the Armenian community and therefore unite it through shared experience of loss made meaningful in the present. Besides being bound by shared historical experience, Wilcock (2018, 373) also interprets the impact of the past on diasporas' present as a sense of duty arising from the "need to atone for leaving".

Collective memory, as well as past presencing, largely depend on trans-generational transmission, or passing on of memories and their meaning from one generation to the next. This way, trauma and loss can become a source of identity even for those who did not directly experience it (LaCapra 2001) as they can form "indirect knowledge" of past events (Hoffman 2004). Hirsch describes the result of this transmission as *postmemory* – experiences transmitted to the "generation after" ... by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up... so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 2012, 5). Postmemory achieves the integration of collective memories with personal family histories, as traumatic events that become further distant in time are relived at both the communal and individual/family level. Both Hirsch (2012) and Laycock (2016), however, caution that new generations risk becoming overwhelmed and dominated by inherited memories, with limited capacity to produce their own identity story.

Indeed, new generations highlight diasporas' uneasy relationship with change. Trans-generational transmission is largely focused on keeping the past present, so that foundational narratives of identity, such as chosen traumas and narratives of loss, continue to unite and mobilize the diasporic community. Diaspora organizations, homeland governments, and parents often seek to maintain these foundational narratives as the way to transmit and maintain diasporic identity for the next generations and cultivate attachments to homeland (see Abramson 2017; Darieva 2018; Mahieu 2015). Yet, this task is complicated by other factors, such as the dynamic relationships between diasporas and homeland, diasporas and host states, and the changing mediums through which they relate. These changing environments contribute to concerns about the new generations failing to form postmemory and becoming disconnected from the memories and cultural roots that are central to diaspora identity. For example, Pattie (1999, 85) documented concern among the older generation of the Armenian diaspora about the "loss" of diasporic youth to "different cultural worlds" whereby the youth becomes selective, future-oriented, and lacking "cultural heirs" in the community. Kasbarian (2018) similarly came across anxiety among Armenian diaspora leaders about the weakening role of the genocide as defining diasporic identity, particularly for younger generations. Brinkerhoff (2012) observed that by moving beyond physical communities and structures into digital spaces, diasporic youth may more freely debate, challenge and re-negotiate key identity narratives., and as a result develop new ties rather than nourish old ones (also see Hiller and Franz 2004).

And yet, as Maier (1993) notes, communities need both to remember and to forget, otherwise they can become preoccupied with narratives of loss – the stage when the political life of a community is focused on sacralizing memory and pursuing public recognition for its sufferings.

The latter is particularly problematic, as the community risks becoming synonymous with victimhood in the eyes of others. Perception of subsequent events and interactions becomes confined to the experience of loss, even if this creates long-term problems. While mobilizing the community around shared trauma, preoccupation with loss can prevent it from moving on, not just politically, but in everyday self-definitions. To enable transformation, identity needs to be reoriented back to the future (Muldoon 2017).

In this study, we focus on questions of how the past is made present, and how the new generation<sup>4</sup> of the Armenian diaspora reconcile the postmemory of events they did not witness with the desire to “move on” from the traumas of the past. Aspects of change can already be observed in how young women in the Armenian diaspora challenge conservative cultural values (Ziemer 2010) and how other, non-Armenian diasporas become engaged in parallel, as opposed to shared, remembering and future-making (Wilcock 2018). These questions can shed new light on diasporas’ capacity for change, and the role of new generations and memory in the process.

## **Method**

We draw on original semi-structured interviews with 26 Armenians, conducted in France, the United Kingdom and Russia. The genocide is the central historical event in the formation of Armenian diasporas in Europe. The Armenian community in France is the largest in the EU (Zenian 1995), and the UK community, although smaller, grew rapidly with the intra-European displacement of Armenians fleeing World War II. Our participants in France and the UK are mainly second-generation and beyond (with most families uprooted by the genocide and some by the Karabakh war). Meanwhile, Russia has the largest population of ethnic Armenians outside Armenia. Applying the term “diaspora” to Russia’s Armenian community at large is problematic: many are temporary economic migrants and Armenians were not considered a diaspora or external migrants during Soviet times (Cavoukian 2013). Our interviewees in Moscow include young Armenians born in Russia or brought into the country shortly after birth, in the wake of the Karabakh war. Their families are settled permanently in Russia and are not temporary labour migrants.

Our participants come from a range of ages between 18-35 (most are in their 20s), representing the generation who have grown up after the independence of Armenia and are too young to remember the Karabakh war. Gender balance was maintained throughout the sample; however, our primary purpose was not to seek a representative sample across potential variables, but to engage with particular experiences of Armenians from the post-independence generation and identify shared patterns of experience through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The interviews were conducted between March and July 2017, and participants were recruited through a snowball approach which enabled us to collect data from within organic social networks (Noy 2008). Participants were directly interviewed in French, English or Russian, and the interview fragments quoted in our analysis are translated into English where necessary. To protect their anonymity, the names of all participants have been changed.

## **Genocide, victimhood and “moving on”**

The genocide of 1915 and the following years played a key role in the emergence of the Armenian diaspora, but is still not recognised by Turkey or most other countries. Genocide denial serves as a constant reminder of past collective trauma: as Ziemer notes, “being Armenian thereafter also meant being a survivor of the genocide and a member of a community of sufferers, whose suffering continues to be denied by the perpetrators and their allies” (2010, 294). As the “final stage of genocide” (Kasbarian 2018), denial gives the event the new meaning of a loss, the mourning of which is not yet complete. Memories of these events, followed by the ongoing controversies of recognitions and denials of the genocide by other countries<sup>5</sup>, are transmitted through generations and continue to play a crucial role in the construction of Armenian identity:

The genocide is a special topic, all our history is split into before and after. Diaspora appeared after the genocide. (Arsen, 28, Russia)

The unifying impact of the genocide through family histories, attachment to the homeland, and the desire for international recognition was felt strongly among the interviewees in Russia, France and the UK. As another participant put it, “it is difficult not to feel Armenian because all these events directly shaped your own biography” (Vigen, 28, Russia). Rouzane from France further emphasizes that the legacy of the genocide has differentiated Armenian identity from simply national, religious or ethnic unity and given it special significance:

[The genocide] is a common destiny because every Armenian family was affected by the massacres, in some way or another. For the existence of the community, this is an important unifying trait, but... many people out there shock me by saying that if we hadn't had the genocide, there would not have been such unity. And this is the question, I think the Jews have the same question, is unity only the result of trauma? This traumatic unity is not the same as just national unity, it is... special. (Rouzane, 31, France)

The ongoing controversies about genocide recognition further contributed to how young diaspora Armenians saw the Armenian state and the diaspora. Armenia was portrayed in the interviews as a small nation surrounded by hostile powers and genocide recognition – as a bargaining chip in the global power politics. As René from France describes,

[This is] a political game around genocide recognition, because foreign countries could force, ask Turkey to recognise the genocide... There's evidence, photos, but... In the USA, 46 states have recognised Armenian genocide, but the US President refuses to name it a genocide, because by doing so he would anger Turkey... and there's NATO. And the Americans want to keep using the [air] base in Incirlik... Israel wants to maintain relations with Turkey to keep selling them weapons. Israelis themselves have survived a genocide... they still have to fight Syria and Egypt to continue to exist. But



they decided not to recognise [the Armenian genocide] ... Turkey is a good client of Israel, and Israel would not lose a good client. (René, 33, France)

For René, and for many other participants, genocide denial is not determined by lack of evidence, but by external political interests. Genocide recognition was seen by some as a cause to be actively supported by the community as a whole, and not only the state, due to the existential significance of the genocide for the diaspora, and the view that the state alone could not achieve recognition. A number of participants felt strongly about the need for recognition and were aware of or took part in various recognition campaigns. Therefore, while creating a disempowered vision of the Armenian state, the issue of genocide recognition mobilizes and empowers young people today in the diaspora community through what they see as a collective struggle for social and political justice, and not only the experience of loss.

However, it is problematic to limit Armenian diaspora identity to shared memories of past violence or to assume that these memories serve as equally powerful and unquestioned referents of identity for all members of the diaspora community. We suggest that the interrelationship between memories of the genocide and diaspora identity could be more multi-layered and complex. The young Armenians we interviewed clearly knew and revered the past but expressed different attitudes to how the genocide should be remembered and spoken about and disagreed on the role it should play in the life and identity of the diaspora and its future generations. These attitudes ranged from actively campaigning for international genocide recognition and defining identity through the history of loss to suggestions that victimhood should not be the source of identity as it confines Armenian-ness to the single unattractive global image of “those poor people who had been massacred” (Rouzane, 31, France). Instead, Armenian culture, knowledge of the Armenian language, or personal qualities (‘Armenian warmth’, hospitality, national pride) were most frequently suggested as key alternative identity markers. Even within history, alternative, non-traumatic events could be found: as René noted,

They talk a lot about the Armenia of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the genocide, the USSR and the war against Azerbaijan, which is still unresolved today. But Armenians are also a people with a 3000-year old history. (René, 33, France)

Armenian youth from all three locations expressed criticism about how the genocide is typically seen as identity-founding and suggested it was time to “move on” and define Armenian identity differently. For younger diaspora Armenians in particular, genocide remembrance is growing increasingly performative – responding to a certain obligation from older members of their community to take part in traditional commemoration activities, which “will not change anything”. Some, like Alice in France, recall resisting the stereotypical perception of Armenians and feeling the need for alternative unifying narratives:

I feel that too often, when they talk about Armenians, they talk about the genocide. We need to talk about it as it’s part of our history... But a hundred years have passed, and I feel that there are new generations for whom there has been enough talk about the genocide. I had this feeling since I was small, and there was a time when I didn’t want to talk about Armenia... to be branded ‘Armenian’, ‘genocide’, ‘Armenian dance’...

This was my Armenian rebellion. But today I really think that the youth, particularly in France, with whom I communicate regularly, need to define themselves differently (Alice, 34, France)

Alice's vision of the need for a redefined relationship between Armenian identity and the genocide was closely echoed by Anahid:

I hope a lot of people will recognize the genocide, but it's very important also to move forward, I think a lot of people are stuck in the past and that is a shame because when you are stuck in the past you cannot progress... We know that it happened, we don't need the recognition of two hundred countries to say that has happened... today is the moment to move forward, to think about the future, to invest in the future of our children. (Anahid, 21, France)

For interviewees with children, the dilemma of 'moving on' meant not just redefining themselves, but the challenge of passing cultural identity on to the next generation without passing on the pain:

I feel I am Armenian in culture and French by citizenship and today I have a small son... and for me the problem is how to explain it to my son that with such diverse heritage, there is history which is painful, unresolved... Particularly the genocide recognition. And this is the burden, I think, that the future generations will also carry... And I really want to pass the culture to my son. I try to speak Armenian to him, and my parents speak Armenian to him too, this needs to happen naturally. And then the question is, how can this all happen without passing on the pain also, and there's lots of it in the community... (Kariné, 31, France)

The young people we interviewed were usually cautious in expressing the idea of "moving on" and included reservations that people need to "talk about" and "recognize" the genocide. There was no uniform agreement on this among their peers, let alone older generations in their families. However, suggestions about "moving on" from the identity-defining role of the genocide or reluctance to pass on the painful aspects of their history to their own children emerged at least in passing in a considerable number of interviews, and were understood by several participants as representing a changing attitude in the diaspora to the role of the genocide in Armenian identity. As the genocide becomes more distant and less personal for new generations, its role as an identity-founding narrative may be tested. The consequences of the genocide, however, have already become an inherent part in the evaluation of other, more recent events in Armenia's history and diasporic behaviors in the present. The genocide may therefore have a further-reaching, lasting underlying impact on the perceptions of Armenia's present, as well as its future.

### **The Karabakh conflict and diasporic identity**

Memories of the genocide are closely intertwined with those of the more recent Karabakh war of the 1990s between Armenia and Azerbaijan and subsequent escalations of violence on the

frontline (notably including the Four Day war between April 1-5, 2016). Karabakh remains effectively under Armenian control (it is a self-proclaimed independent state, unrecognized by the international community), and each side periodically accuses the other of violating the ceasefire, keeping the crisis permanently on the regional political agenda. Three points of connection between the genocide and the Karabakh conflict strongly emerge from the interviews. First, the genocide and the Karabakh war share the same symbolic adversary: many of our interviewees regarded Azeris as Turks, and Azerbaijan as Turkey's satellite state, directly blaming Turkey for the conflict and connecting the enemy in the Karabakh war to the genocide perpetrator. Azerbaijan and Turkey have close cultural and linguistic ties, and Turkey has supported Azerbaijan in the Karabakh dispute and at times made demands on the status of Karabakh in negotiations to normalise relations with Armenia, leading Armenians to view this as the continuation of its anti-Armenian policies. Second, both events remain unresolved, with the ongoing struggle for the international recognition of the genocide and the volatility of the ceasefire in Karabakh. History – and unresolved history in particular, in which conflict, family history of emigration, and loss of homeland are bound together – becomes an important element of Armenian diaspora identity. Third, some of the interviewees explained specific attachment to Karabakh and the need to protect the Armenian victory there as a symbolic fight for survival and historical justice, which has been denied for too long. They noted that the importance of Karabakh to Armenians is directly connected to the genocide and represents a preoccupation with the loss of human life, land, and culture associated with the nation:

Armenians have lost so much land, and so many people, and Karabakh brings that back. Armenians feel that they are right in this, and I feel that too. So, it is important, it's about justice (Arman, 23, UK)

And yet, despite the temporal proximity of the war and the unresolved status of Karabakh, for many in the diaspora youth, the conflict seemed more distant and less significant as a unifying factor, compared to the genocide. It had less personal influence for many, and the interviewees who felt particularly strongly about the conflict were the ones who still had relatives in Armenia and Karabakh or knew friends who had gone to fight as volunteers. British and French Armenians in particular also noted that major western media devoted little attention to the region, making it difficult to access news about the conflict<sup>6</sup>. Karabakh became a distant, invisible war with a clear past but uncertain present. The four-day escalation of April 2016 revived conversations about Karabakh, particularly online discussions among younger Armenians, some of whom considered possible ways to help their homeland at this time and mobilize as a community or knew others who thought of leaving for Armenia to support the military. But when speaking about the conflict and its unresolved status more generally, most were relatively dispassionate and conveyed uncertainty about what should be done.

While clearly accusing Azerbaijan and Turkey for starting the war, some of the participants blamed the unresolved status of the conflict on Armenia's own state policies. In doing so, they drew a distinction between the courage and historical victimhood of the Armenian people and the ineffectiveness of the government. The existence of the independent Armenian state is an important factor in making the experience of the unresolved Karabakh conflict different from the genocide: in stark contrast to the genocide, where the Armenian community could campaign

for genocide recognition as a clear goal while state capabilities were limited, the interviewees no longer saw themselves or community initiatives as capable of securing the status of Karabakh. As Seda from the UK noted,

You feel that you have so much love you want to give but physically you think well what can I do? Like Seda cannot stop hostile Turkey, Seda cannot stop hostile Azeris... I definitely think that being this vulnerable small Christian nation surrounded by these big hostile powers, that is a hard thing for the diaspora. And it's difficult because do we have the right to have these views when we ourselves aren't there? (Seda, 20, UK)

For Seda, the diaspora community is both disempowered and unable to suggest effective solutions to the conflict from a distance. Similarly, Rafael from France sees a limited role for the diaspora in resolving the status of Karabakh, suggesting that community resources would be spent more effectively on campaigning for genocide recognition:

In the diaspora we talk more about the fight for genocide [recognition] rather than for Karabakh, because Karabakh, at the moment, is under Armenian control. For the state leaders, it's just another problem. We can only wait for Azerbaijan to recognise this. But with the genocide, there are always things we [in the diaspora] can do. (Rafael, 24, France)

For both Seda and Rafael, as for many other participants, resolving the Karabakh conflict was seen as the responsibility of the state and as a political problem, with little room for Armenian diaspora initiatives. The state, however, was mostly criticized for not prioritizing people's security in conflict negotiations and for not being hardline or decisive enough. Moreover, interviewees often approached Karabakh as part of a set of problems facing the Armenian government (such as corruption), and their critical or oppositional attitudes to state policies contributed to a certain sense of political disunity with the homeland (see Authors, forthcoming):

The country's resources are mostly oriented towards enriching the politicians, and this is the problem. The four-day war [in Karabakh] revealed big problems with military equipment, so here in France we led appeals to help Armenian soldiers... they don't have raincoats, sleeping bags, drones, other things... And we know very well that the oligarchy [in Armenia] has the money, millions, for that. That's paradoxical. They have this post-soviet mentality – make money, make money at the expense of others, while here in the diaspora we have a better vision of the Armenian nation. (René, 33, France)

This vision, according to René, was not shared by state Armenians: while the diaspora was investing in the Armenian state and joining the struggle to restore their homeland, the locals were thinking of leaving. This makes René feel conflicted, as diasporic community mobilization in the face of the escalation appeared to be at odds with the (in)action and priorities of the state. The Karabakh conflict thus serves as an element of Armenia's present that provides a mobilizing patriotic focal point for the diasporic community, and at the same time surfaces disillusionment with the state.

To conclude, the Karabakh conflict, although less commonly acknowledged by our interviewees as crucial to their sense of Armenian identity, closely interacts with memories of the genocide and contributes to their vision of homeland and mobilization as a community. Not least, Armenian control of Karabakh following the war is made important by the genocide, as a symbolic victory, a part of the homeland which has been won back. As an unresolved conflict, its memories and recent escalations contribute to narratives of survival. And yet, it also strengthens a sense of political disunity between the diaspora and the state, uncertainty about what should be done and a feeling of community disempowerment, thus making it less unequivocal as a mobilizing historical referent of Armenian diasporic identity.

### **Genocide, Karabakh and everyday past presencing**

Besides the openly acknowledged influence of the past on the sense of collective identity and the relationship with the Armenian state, memories of the genocide and the Karabakh war had a more (un)conscious influence, embedded in the participants' everyday self-understandings and behaviors. The self/other categories contained in these memories were projected onto friendships, social networks, families, and overall integration in British, French, or Russian societies. Many of our participants, including some second and third generation migrants, admitted that many or most of their friends were also Armenian, and for some, assimilation into the host society meant the loss of Armenian culture, a symbolic failure to survive, to preserve the Armenian identity. In this sense, unresolved histories both united diasporic community members from within, and contributed to the continuous and everyday reaffirmation of identity boundaries by excluding others:

Here in France, when you work somewhere, and you meet a colleague who is Armenian you will have a particular relationship with him compared to your other colleagues. And when an Italian meets another Italian, it's not the same, ah? Because you know you are a people who were born on a mountain of dead people, and we know the importance of this, we have to achieve. It is very linked to Karabakh because, I think if the genocide didn't happen Armenians would not be interested in the situation of Karabakh. (Souren, 20, France)

The experience of loss draws young diasporic Armenians apart from their non-Armenian peers at a personal, and not only collective level. Vazgen, born in the UK to an Armenian family who had fled the genocide to Syria and then moved to the UK in the late 1970s, comments:

I remember as a child in school [in the UK], you were always asked to talk about family trees, to talk about where you are from, your history, and I was never able to really partake in that... It upsets me because there's so much I'd like to know about my history, and I can't. I'll never have that chance to find out. (Vazgen, 33, UK)

Souren, Vazgen and other participants noted the strong influence of the past on their behavior in the present, giving a new meaning – symbolic survival – to maintaining cultural, linguistic, or historical links with other Armenians. They vividly conjured the mass killing of the genocide

as a factor in everyday interactions. Notions of survival, extermination, war, and killing emerged in how the participants spoke about their everyday lives, beyond remembering the genocide and the Karabakh war as historical events. For them, these were “histories that have stayed open” (Ahmed 2004, 59) that still influence individual behaviors and, not least, are experienced as the diaspora’s expectation that new generations would ‘guard’ Armenian identity and ensure its survival. For example, Marina from the UK spoke of feeling social and family pressure to preserve Armenian identity and cultural heritage through marriage:

Armenians are always like, why don't you marry a nice Armenian, you have to marry an Armenian boy because we're dying out, they are trying to kill us and it is like, Jesus Christ, it is 2017, you know, but people do genuinely believe that, a lot of people do, some of my family believe that because, you know, it is this constant struggle, this constant mentality of survival. (Marina, 25, UK)

The idea of women as “keepers of the culture” (Billson 1995) suggests an expectation that identity, memory and culture are preserved within the family. Marina, however, sees this as an outdated viewpoint, feeling that new generations should “move on” from this preoccupation with loss. But besides family, the memories of the genocide and the Karabakh war also influenced friendship circles, particularly for those whose families had emigrated because of the war. For example, almost none of the young interviewees in Russia had Turkish or Azerbaijani friends and there seemed to be peer pressure not to be friends with the “enemy”:

When I became friends with other Armenians, we do not like Azeris... Now at university I know an Armenian student who is friends with a student from Azerbaijan, and for me that's a bit of a shock, because I haven't been friends [with Azeris]... (Mariam, 27, Russia)

For another participant, the influence on friendships was even more extensive and affected people from other ethnic backgrounds too, depending on their attitude or involvement in the war:

I try to mix with Russian guys more, even try to avoid people from the Caucasus as some of them fought for Azerbaijan in the war (Arsen, 28, Russia)

It is worth noting the difference between the Russian and the French/British contexts here. Many of the French or British interviewees would not regularly encounter an Azeri, whereas in Moscow it would be normal for Armenians and Azeris, as Caucasians with similar migration patterns, to come across each other. Among older generations, there have been cases of good relations between the two communities in Moscow, including joint businesses. While avoiding Azeris in Moscow may be conscious post-war generation behavior among the diaspora youth (some of whose families left Armenia in the wake of the 1990s Karabakh war), there was little evidence in the interviewees’ responses in France and the UK to suggest active avoidance of Turks in social encounters in the West – rather, more general attitudes towards the nation.

Interviews with young diasporic Armenians therefore reveal evidence of past presencing. The meaning and memories of the Karabakh war are overshadowed by the memories and

consequences of the genocide, but both these events influence the participants' everyday behaviors beyond mere remembering. Such implicit past presencing, worked into friendships, family expectations, sense of purpose, and perception of subsequent events, is often at odds with the explicit, if cautious, desire to leave the traumatic past behind and redefine diasporic identity. This contradiction is further exposed in looking at the mediums through which this past is transmitted, relived and renegotiated, to which we now turn.

### **Postmemory and new ways of relating to past and present**

For our participants, both the genocide and the Karabakh war of the 1990s are events which they did not witness directly. Growing up after or at the time when Armenia gained independence, their understanding of these events largely depends on trans-generational transmission, or the passing on of memories and myths through family, community, and cultural mediums, and the formation of postmemory (Hirsch 2012). Even the recent escalations of the Karabakh conflict were witnessed by the diaspora youth at a distance, although some remain more connected to the region than others. Nevertheless, the Karabakh war and the genocide played significant, though different roles in how diaspora youth described their identity, related to the distant homeland, and experienced the present. Importantly, they described several avenues of how these postmemories became important for their sense of identity.

The transmission of collective memories among Armenians is typically linked to the 'retelling of genocide' from generation to generation in the family (Ziemer 2010), including the retelling of personal, family histories. For many diaspora Armenians, their families' emigration is directly connected to the events of 1915 or to the 1990s Karabakh war<sup>7</sup>. The genocide or the Karabakh war are often the reason for their being there, outside of the homeland in the first place, making the memory of these events foundational to the notions of identity and "home" (Brah 1996). Reflecting back on their own childhood, our interviewees often spoke about learning about the genocide and the Karabakh war from immediate family. However, and particularly with Karabakh, there were occasions when older generations never spoke to them directly about these traumatic events. When transmission did happen, some of it was unintentional (overhearing parents talking about the war) or without yet realizing the full meaning of it:

When I was small, perhaps 4-5 years old, my dad says he took me to a protest. I sat on his shoulders and cried: "Karabakh [phrase in Armenian]", which means Karabakh is ours, Karabakh is Armenian. (Adrien, 32, France)

But while trans-generational transmission within the family is clearly very important, we also observed additional ways in which young Armenians engaged with their homeland's past and present not available to previous generations: through Armenian societies and diaspora groups, through visits to Armenia (organised by schools, diaspora organizations and sponsors), and through social media.

University was often the time when interviewees became more independent from their families, and the place where they became involved with Armenian societies and groups. Some spoke of (re)discovering Armenian history and identity, often beyond the attachments and memories shared within the family. As Vigen from Russia recounts,

My study at Moscow State [University] was the first time I encountered a normal, organised Armenian society. I saw all their announcements, and I started thinking that, I don't know, I wanted to... be of help to the [Armenian] community on the whole, and I still feel that way. (Vigen, 28, Russia)

Often coinciding with their time at high school or University, a surprising number of our interviewees in all three countries visited Armenia through various programmes run by diaspora organizations, NGOs and the Armenian Ministry of Diaspora, who sponsored student exchanges and offered volunteer opportunities. Homeland tourism has been successfully employed by multiple homeland governments and diaspora structures in order to cultivate diasporic attachments (Abramson 2017). In the Armenian case, the post-independence period has seen the emergence of a variant of this phenomenon entailing assistance and exchange programmes with the local population run independently of the state (Darieva 2018). For most our interviewees, even if they had been to Armenia with their family before the sponsored visit, this type of visit was a new experience, which enabled a different kind of an identity connection to be established:

Every year we would visit my grandma and grandad in Armenia, and when I reached adulthood, having finished university, I travelled to Armenia for the first time not to visit relatives but through an American programme called YSIP<sup>8</sup>. That was an unforgettable experience. It was my discovery of Armenia, the other side of it. We worked there; we helped the local population for free; we travelled around Armenia and even went to Karabakh. There were guys from the diaspora in Syria, USA, Canada... I learnt a lot about Armenians in the West, they are very different from us... they better know our history, even are more patriotic than Russian Armenians. (Mariam, 27, Russia)

While the sponsored visit enabled Mariam to connect with Armenia and other Armenians abroad in a more significant way, another interviewee described how the postmemories of the genocide and the practices of commemoration, previously transmitted to him in his family and the diaspora community in France, came alive and gained new personal significance on his first visit to Yerevan:

Until the age of 15 I had never been to Armenia... and then my school organised a visit. This was April 24, the commemorations of the 95h anniversary of the genocide in Yerevan... when I came out of the airport there, I felt shivers running all through my body. Because I said to myself "so I'm there, I'm in my country, on the land of my ancestors". I mean, if we had fought for so many years, this, in fact, was the fruit of our battle, of our war I mean... Taking part in the commemorations there... was so different from France, in France there are protests, loud cries; in Armenia everyone was in black



and weeping. At that moment I felt part of the Armenian community. (Magar, 28, France)

The experiences of Mariam and Magar, also typical of other participants, demonstrate that reconnection of young diaspora Armenians with their homeland and transmission of collective memories also happen outside of the traditional confines of family and local diaspora community. These additional avenues for remembering and relating to the homeland's past and present offered powerful new perceptions of identity as they linked the postmemories of genocide, war, and loss to places and communities that the young people could witness in person and in the present. Sponsored homeland visits and the coming of age that often coincided with a revived interest in the homeland show how the new generations begin to write their own identity stories independently from their families, yet how postmemories are relived in them.

Social media provide further opportunities for the young generation to develop and become active agents in their identity stories, interweaving the genocide and Karabakh into their self-understandings or on the contrary, moving away from the established interpretations of events in the homeland. The connection of diasporic youth to events in the homeland and to each other is becoming increasingly digital, facilitated by news websites and social media. During the escalation of the Karabakh conflict in April 2016, many participants were kept informed through social media posts, including some who were not actively seeking information, but were simply subscribed to an Armenian group on Facebook:

All the Armenian diaspora have already liked an Armenian page, and on all of these pages you have articles, and the constant, not propaganda, but the constant news that was coming through, I mean it's hard to ignore. (Anahid, 21, France)

Social media brought geographically distant events close, while the plurivocal and interactive nature of online discussions facilitated both mobilization and contestation in relation to the homeland's past and present.

For some, social media can become a space for activism, for online battles to affirm social and historical justice from a distance. In such cases, awareness of the plurality of perspectives on the conflict reported online was seen to motivate a desire to join in promoting a particular position on the virtual battlefield over postmemory. For example, Moscow participant Arsen (28) recounts taking part in online truth wars surrounding the Karabakh conflict through "an analytical group on a social network where I fight against the distortion of facts". While the group provides Arsen with an opportunity to engage, his experience online also leaves him feeling frustrated with the Armenian community, as he later complains that many Armenians online are indifferent because they live outside of Armenia and distance themselves from its problems. In this way, digital platforms can empower youth in diaspora to take an active role in present-day causes linked to transmitted memories but can also bring out differences or tensions within the community.

The proximity and immediacy of events brought by social media can also contain the reassuring promise of transparency in the conflict. René from France, for example, felt that the instant

nature of contemporary media communications meant that they functioned as a means of global accountability and a deterrent against new large-scale violence against the Armenian community:

Today, in the era of communication and information, nothing can happen anymore without people being aware of it. And I think today, at least in Armenia, there can no longer be a hidden war or a massacre that is concealed. (René, 33, France)

From this perspective, the daily witnessed reality of low intensity suffering represented by the Karabakh conflict is juxtaposed with the unaccounted-for mass crime of the genocide, firmly located in the past. Social media here is understood to create a new role for diaspora Armenians as ever-present witnesses to potential violence and keepers of the nation and its past through their online presence.

On the other hand, social media has provided young diasporic Armenians with a space to contest, if not move away from, certain interpretations of the past and present. For example, Marina from the UK describes feeling disgusted by the mass nationalism of other Armenians on social media during the April 2016 escalation in Karabakh:

Armenians are extremely active on Facebook... While I'm devastated that those poor guys got killed in this war, living outside of Armenia in a country where there has been peace, I'm extremely, you know, anti-nationalist... When the April stuff happened last year, I was really conflicted because everyone around me was, you know, 'we love our troops', 'God bless soldiers', 'God bless the army' and stuff... people were posting links like, you know, we killed this many [enemies] in this conflict, and people were like 'yay'. That was horrible. (Marina, 25, UK)

Although not all participants shared Marina's attitude to escalations in Karabakh, the majority of young people interviewed voiced explicit concerns about bias and unreliability of news they accessed about events in the region. As Rafael (24) from France put it, 'It's really a shame because it's very hard to have reliable information on [the Karabakh conflict].'" Several participants made an active effort to seek out varied online sources or cross-check news in order to be better informed.

The desire to gain a balanced assessment of events often overshadowed any personal emotions concerning the significance of the territory to the Armenian community among those without close personal ties to Karabakh. Awareness of different perspectives on the conflict encountered online left some participants hesitant to voice a clear position. This ambivalent approach to the conflict based on experience of it primarily as a media phenomenon was seen by some a generationally distinct aspect of diaspora identity, particularly among the young Armenians in the UK and France:

I'm very conscious of the fact that I'm only getting one side of the story, because when I read a lot of Azeri news and a lot of stuff is complete propaganda and fake, it makes me think, like, ok, hang on, how much of what I am reading about from Armenian news is real, you know? And it is hard to explain to my parents because they lived through

and they saw so many friends of theirs die in the war in the 90s. So, with this, yes, it is really sad and really difficult to get your head around as someone who doesn't live there. (Marina, 25, UK)

Thus, while homeland visits have helped many of our participants revive postmemories and experience the significance of the past in new ways, digital media has led diasporic youth to engage with the Karabakh conflict and other events in their homeland in more ambivalent ways. On the one hand, digital media make distant events present and empower diasporas as online witnesses of potential (in)justice. On the other – the new generation can come to question uncritical, nationalist or one-sided accounts of events, the actions of the Armenian state, and the Armenian community's acceptance and reproduction of narratives about its traumatic past. The latter has potential to disrupt the long-term viability of these narratives as shared referents of diasporic identity in the future.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored some of the dilemmas experienced and voiced by Armenian diasporic youth in negotiating their identity in relation to the genocide and the Karabakh war. "Moving on" from collective memories of the genocide as shaping Armenian diasporic identity was a recurring theme in interviews in all three locations. Interview participants spoke of moving on as redefining themselves and the diasporic community beyond narratives of victimhood and loss, passing on identity without passing on the pain to the next generations, being active agents in writing their own identity story, and questioning some of the less critical accounts of the homeland's past and present. This finding challenges the vision of past traumas as foundational and defining identity narratives that are continuously shared and agreed on by the new diasporic generations. Yet moving on did not mean a clear break with the past; in fact, young people's cautious desire to move on and redefine Armenian identity beyond traumatic history was at the same time evidence of how strongly they experienced past presencing. It was clear that they were acutely aware of and deeply involved in the reproduction of a past which they had not directly witnessed. The legacy of the genocide and the more recent unresolved Karabakh conflict was experienced, represented, and performed – in other words, made present beyond simply remembering. The Karabakh conflict, as a symbolic fight to protect part of the homeland, was interpreted in light of the genocide, and the "mentality of survival" permeated everyday behaviours, from friendships to visions of family, homeland, and the future.

There is also ambivalence about the role of the Karabakh war in Armenian diasporic identity, in the presence of an independent Armenian state. The Karabakh conflict, as a more recent event and part of the struggle for an independent homeland, contributes to diaspora mobilization, but is also interpreted from a distancing, pragmatic perspective as a problem that Armenians abroad cannot help resolve. The presence of the state makes the experience of the Karabakh conflict different from the genocide and less unifying, both in terms of responsibility for the status quo and action that needs to be taken.

The dilemma of prioritising the memories of the genocide and Karabakh or ‘moving on’ to interpretations of diasporic identity beyond the core narratives of victimhood is deepened by the diverse and increasingly digital practices of relating to events in the homeland in which young people in diaspora can now engage. Whether expressing a cautious desire to write their own identity story on top of the inherited postmemory of the genocide or distancing themselves from attitudes to the Karabakh conflict found online, they took the past along with them in conceptions of homeland and identity, while also questioning whether the community’s future should be only about this past. The example of Armenian diasporic youth demonstrates how digital media can help new generations of this and other diasporas mobilize in new ways in response to critical events in the homeland but also stimulate reflection on these events, critical engagement with news sources, and ambivalence over narratives of homeland and diaspora identity. Importantly, this case shows how young generations have already begun to ‘move on’ by reproducing foundational narratives but at the same time questioning and problematizing them.

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<sup>1</sup> Homeland has been a contested notion for Armenians: the borders of the post-Soviet Republic of Armenia do not include the lands from where most of the genocide survivors fled, and even before the genocide there had been “no clearly defined center and periphery acknowledged by all Armenians” (Pattie 1999, 82). However, the survival of the independent Armenian state today is widely acknowledged by diaspora Armenians as highly important (Avdoyan 1998), denoting its mobilizing potential as homeland.

<sup>2</sup> The Armenian genocide involved systematic extermination and deportation of Armenians by the Ottoman empire from April 1915 and throughout World War I. It left approximately 1.5 million people dead and caused many to flee (Alayarian 2008). Most Armenian diasporas around the world appeared as the result of the genocide.

<sup>3</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh is a territory disputed by Armenia and Azerbaijan as both claim to have historical rights on it. Violent conflict erupted in the final years of the Soviet Union between Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, backed by the Republic of Armenia, and Azerbaijan, with the most intensive fighting in 1993-1994. The war ended in a ceasefire, but the sides failed to negotiate a peace treaty. The conflict remains unresolved, with a number of major escalations in recent years. Currently Karabakh is a self-proclaimed independent state, de facto under Armenian control and protection.

<sup>4</sup> The “new generation” in this study has two meanings, which contribute to one another, but do not always overlap: 1) generation that marks distance from past events (genocide, migration) and interprets them through postmemory, and 2) generation as the cohort of young people who have grown up in the particular context of the independent Armenian state, the Karabakh conflict and digital media.

<sup>5</sup> Most recently, the genocide was recognized by the German parliament in 2016, escalating tensions with Turkey.

<sup>6</sup> A similar criticism of host society media by diaspora youth has also been observed by Eide et al (2014) in the case of Pakistani, Afghan and Tamil diasporas in Norway; and likewise, Armenian diaspora youth have increasingly turned to online and social media to keep in touch with events back at home, as we discuss later in the paper.

<sup>7</sup> In our pool of participants, most Armenian youth in the United Kingdom and France traced their families’ emigration back to the genocide, while families of the Armenian interviewees in Russia mostly left Armenia in the wake of the 1990s Karabakh war. This agrees with the overall view in the diaspora studies of Armenian diasporas in Europe as “older” diasporas, while the diaspora in Russia is post-Soviet, not least because Armenia was part of the USSR for most of the time between the genocide and the Karabakh war.

<sup>8</sup> YSIP (Yerevan Summer Internship Program) is a project run by the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), which offers university students aged 19-26 an opportunity to gain work experience in Armenia’s capital.

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