Wilmers, L. and Chernobrov, D. (2019) Growing up with a long-awaited nation-state: Personal struggles with the homeland among young diasporic Armenians *Ethnicities*, DOI: 10.1177/1468796819866973 (accepted version)

https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796819866973

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Acknowledgments:

This work was part supported by the University of Southern California Institute of Armenian Studies.

The authors are grateful to Dr. Susan Pattie for useful discussions.

Word count: 9558 words

Growing up with a long-awaited nation-state:

Personal struggles with the homeland among young diasporic Armenians

Abstract

This paper explores identification with the nation-state as homeland among young diasporic Armenians in France, Russia and the UK. For dispersed Armenian communities worldwide, the emergence of a fragile nation-state since 1991 has represented a form of collective goal fulfilment accompanied at times by disillusionment in the national myth of the homeland as a place of sanctuary. We argue that the resulting shift in understandings of homeland markedly differentiates the diasporic experiences of Armenians of diverse backgrounds growing up in the post-independence era from those of previous generations. Key to this shift are ambivalent dynamics between memory and myth integral to personal struggles with the homeland. Analysing original interviews with Armenians aged 18 to 35 in three host states, we unpack how memories of contact with the Armenian state accumulated in youth interact with national myths about the homeland in the context of different family migration histories. The active engagement of young people with homeland myths is shown to play an important role in their recollections of first formative visits to Armenia. Through more regular contact with the state, disappointment in elements of politics and culture that clash with personal imaginings of the homeland can lead to ambivalence in identifying with Armenia. Ultimately, the state plays a key orienting role for many young diasporic Armenians, but clashes between recalled encounters and myths concerning the state can render it a place of partial belonging, unable to fulfil the ideals of the diasporic imagination. The findings highlight the value of attending to interaction between memory and myth in diasporic engagement with 'homeland' states more broadly.

Key words

diaspora, homeland, nation-state, memory, generation, Armenia, identity, genocide

Introduction

Over the past three decades, the emergence of an independent Armenian state in the post-Soviet space and concerns over its security and social conditions have created a new focus of attention across communities of Armenians living beyond its borders (Pattie 2005). The traumatic mass forced exile of Armenians from Ottoman Turkey in the early 20th Century had led to the mythologization of a longed-for sovereign homeland that would deliver restitution and security for a dispersed nation, which the Republic of Armenia came to symbolise. Today's young diasporic Armenians descended from this wave of migration have grown up at a time in which the myth has been undermined by challenging conditions in the new state, including border conflict, poverty, inequality, corrupt governance and population decline through emigration. For those from more recent migration waves from Armenia, the myth of the state as homeland unifies them with the wider Armenian community, but it is also a

place of problems that caused their own families to emigrate. Over the same period, the growth of digital media and communication has given this generation significant new opportunities to connect with others and delve into events in the region that were previously impossible.

This paper addresses the question of how remembered encounters with the new Armenian state as a young adult interact with national myths of homeland, including the idealisation of 'return', in shaping identification with Armenia as homeland. Drawing on Bell's (2003) social agency approach to national identity that focuses on the interaction of myths and memory, we analyse in-depth interviews with 26 Armenians aged 18-35 active in diasporic communities in France, Russia and the UK. We argue that the emergence of an independent Armenian state during a period of accelerated globalisation significantly distinguishes the experience of diaspora nationhood of young Armenians today from that of previous generations. Many have been able to independently experience the state in early adulthood, negotiating feelings of self-discovery and reconnection alongside disillusionment and distancing. We demonstrate how these personal processes in the transition to adulthood at a time of frustrated goal fulfilment for the community can impact on the way individuals identify with Armenia as a place of belonging, and engage with myths framing the state as a unifying homeland. We find that the state provides a key orienting role, particularly in addressing fears of diasporic assimilation and the future of the dispersed nation. However, this role is complicated by tensions between remembered encounters with the state and myths of homeland, situated in particular migration histories and host country contexts. These tensions lead many to experience complex, ambivalent feelings towards the Armenian state.

We proceed by locating this study in relation to literature on homeland and diaspora and to the Armenian context and outlining the contribution of a social agency approach (Bell 2003) to theorising identification with a diasporic homeland. Turning to the findings of the study, we examine how myths of Armenia as homeland interact with memories of visiting the Armenian state among youth from different backgrounds. We then explore how such myths are reconciled with experiences of the cultural and political norms of the state, where they are in contradiction. Finally, we explore participants' visions of the future of diasporic relations with Armenia.

Memory and myth in constructing the Armenian diasporic homeland

Homelands have long been represented as the territory of a nation's origins and roots, and at times also as a sacred place for a 'chosen people'. From a constructivist perspective, we agree with Robert J. Kaiser (2002) that homelands are politically and culturally produced, historically situated, contingent and evolving. In this sense, myths about the homeland that give it particular meanings and symbolic value are reproduced variously across the public narratives of different elite institutions and are subject to the societal mores of the time. At the same time, individuals imagine and relate to the homeland of collective imaginings in personal ways. The diasporic relationship with a putative homeland takes a particular form due to the dislocation between place of long-term residence and place of emotional

attachment (Lainer-Vos 2010). Relating to the shared, imagined homeland of one's ancestors is often viewed as central to diasporic identities (Safran 1991, Tölölyan 2007). It is with the complexity of this diasporic relationship with the homeland that this paper is concerned. As well as conveying symbolic meaning, the homeland plays an embodied and emotional role in the formation of diaspora identities (Abramson 2017). The diasporic attachment to a homeland has been interpreted through feelings of longing and loss and seen to underlie a fantasy of fulfilment through return in diasporic narratives (Hirsch & Miller 2011, Silva 2009). Furthermore, the constructed homeland is not restricted to associations with an existing state, but can be the subject of utopian dreams (Walle 2013).

The importance of the homeland to diasporic identities means that the circulation of stories about the past connecting people to an absent homeland is important in their maintenance and mobilisation. The term 'collective memory' coined by Maurice Halbwachs (1950) is widely used to understand processes that lead people to identify with historical events as if they were personal experiences and feel connected to a wider community through this relationship with the past (see Anderson 1983; Volkan 1988). While the imprint of the collective past is important in diasporic conceptions of the nation, the extension of the term memory to include reconstructions of previous generations' experiences blurs the distinction between personal recollection and received mythology, which arise differently and can contradict one another (Bell 2003). Marianne Hirsch's (2008) concept of postmemory theorises this difference in the context of trauma, distinguishing the phenomenon of personal re-association with traumatic events experienced by previous generations. Jo Laycock (2016) shows how postmemory of the Armenian genocide has interacted with memories of later 20th Century events such as the Cold War in the framing of complex migration narratives by returnees to Soviet Armenia. Importantly, this work shows how personal memories can collide with transferred myths and produce tension.

Duncan Bell's (2003) social agency approach to national identity advocates a distinction between memory and national mythology more broadly and a focus on their interaction. Memory as a socially framed but nonetheless individual processing of direct experience is contrasted with the collective formulation of past events of nation-making narratives, understood as myths. Conflict between memory and myth in this sense has been observed in accounts of diasporic 'return' to the homeland. Baser and Toivanen (2018) demonstrate how returnees to Kurdistan in the 2000s who later chose to repatriate to their host country often recalled having positive expectations of the homeland dismantled by the challenges of daily life there, including nepotism and corruption. In the Armenian context, Laycock (2016) writes that memories of diasporic 'return' to Soviet Armenia problematised the myth of this 'homeland' as the destination of 'happy endings'. The conceptual division of memory and myth can therefore contribute to understanding the construction of homeland from the bottom-up (see also Zeimer 2010). In particular, it provides a productive lens for unpacking the implications of complexity and contention in constructions of homeland for diasporic identification with nation-states.

The relationship of the Armenian diaspora to the nation-state must be understood in the context of the impact of the 1915 genocide and mass displacement on national mythology. While Armenians settled across territories outside of today's Republic of Armenia over many centuries, today's diasporic communities were largely formed through the exodus of

survivors of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 from Ottoman Turkey and mass deportations in the late 19th Century. For many Armenians, including descendants of refugees fleeing genocide, the borders of the post-Soviet Armenian state founded in 1991 do not include the lands or culture of their ancestors associated with the lost homeland. Ramzik Panossian (2002:137) refers to the genocide as a defining event for Armenian identity as a whole, such that being Armenian 'came to be associated with a 'lost homeland' and the need to regain it'.

This binding sense of national loss has been described as a 'victimhood mentality' (Panossian 2002) that reaches beyond Cohen's (1996) notion of a 'victim diaspora' to form a defining pillar of Armenian identity for the whole nation. The homeland lost by genocide survivors acquired idealised, mythical status and their descendants had to come to terms with the inability of the 'step-homeland'– the Republic of Armenia – to live up to expectations (Kasbarian 2018:359). In this context, Armenia can be seen as a 'long-awaited' nation-state, one which came into being with a baggage of unrealisable expectations connected to myths of homeland rooted in a painful history. The myth of fulfilment of diasporic loss through return had been tempered earlier by the difficulties experienced by those who moved to Soviet Armenia, many of whom re-emigrated (Ishkanian 2005, Laycock 2016). Nevertheless, the nation-state founded in 1991 came to symbolise a shared haven for Armenians of all backgrounds (Pattie 1999, 2005), accepted widely as a homeland to which the diaspora should connect and offer protection and aid (Suny 1993:230). Today, many diaspora organisations, including those addressing post-Soviet emigrants as well as the old diaspora, promote a transnational vision of the Armenian nation, encouraging engagement with Armenia as a unifying 'homeland' alongside host state and global networks (Kasbarian 2018:361). Armenian communities remain highly diverse and their historical differences shape ways of understanding Armenian-ness[i]. Nevertheless, today's Armenian youth across diasporic contexts have grown up with the nation-state as a new common focal point for a broader Armenian identity.

In applying Bell's (2003) social agency approach to young people's experiences of the new state, it is important to consider that much diasporic engagement with states today is mediated by news reporting and other forms of third party testimony. Internalised myths of homeland therefore interact with memories not only of direct contact with the state but also of events mediated by the accounts of others. This is particularly relevant in contexts of instability in 'homeland' territories. Armenia's independence came during a period of widespread devastation and displacement for the local population due to the Spitak earthquake of 1988 and the war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, which continued until 1994. The ceasefire since in place is regularly violated and the conflict with Azerbaijan remains unresolved. As a landlocked country maintaining closed borders with two of its four neighbours, Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia is economically isolated in the region. The fragility of the nation-state[ii] and the vulnerability of its inhabitants to poverty[iii] and corruption[iv] have contributed to high levels of emigration. According to state figures, the population remains under 3 million, well below the figure of over 3.5 million living there in 1990 (National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia 2017). The diaspora, by comparison, is widely estimated to include considerably greater numbers. The state has relied heavily on diaspora aid and assistance for its development and for basic services to

impoverished communities, fostering engagement with Armenia as homeland, including through a Ministry of Diaspora in operation from 2008 to 2018. Diasporic engagement has also taken the form of political lobbying for state interests in host countries (Paul 2000). Meanwhile, post-Soviet waves of emigration have created tensions where members of the old diaspora who had idealised local Armenians were disillusioned in encountering them (Pattie 2005). ~~Meanwhile, the myth of victimhood as defining the nation linked to the genocide has, for some, been revived in appraising Armenia's problems today.~~

In this period of dynamic developments, there are diverse channels of information through which young people may have encountered the new Armenian state and its society. In particular, the lifetime of the new state has coincided with the rapid emergence of online communities. For diasporic communities, it has become easier to connect with others who share a perceived common identity, locally and across the world, and engage in actions oriented towards the homeland, changing the perceived spatiality of nations and diaspora (Carter 2007, Eriksen 2007). Digital spaces offer opportunities for new hybrid identities and can intensify socio-economic engagement with the homeland (Brinkerhoff 2009). Access to diverse sources of information can lead to discerning engagement. In Norway, access to international, host state and diasporic state media among Pakistani, Afghan and Tamil diaspora youth was found to inform critical consumption of conflict coverage in their home countries (Eide, Knudsen and Krøvel 2014). Meanwhile, attention has been drawn to emerging forms of radical diaspora nationalism enabled by digital technology among a range of ethnic communities globally (Conversi 2012). Armenians in their 20s and early 30s from outside the state have grown up with new ways of pursuing diasporic connections, as well as a new political reality shaping the wider community. Many have been able to develop regular contact with people and events in Armenia. Furthermore, the growth of NGO volunteering schemes and diaspora reconnection programmes has shaped support to the new nation-state as homeland and broadened possibilities for ongoing transnational mobility, including temporary acts of 'sojourning' or extended visits short of migration as a form of return (Kasbarian 2018).

The scale of political events and culturally transformative technological advances during the lifetimes of today's young Armenians in the diaspora makes a compelling case for investigating the generational aspect of conceptions of homeland. Mannheim (1992) proposed that birth cohorts can develop a common outlook through sharing experience of significant political events during the formative period that he defined as late adolescence and early adulthood. Later studies have provided empirical evidence in support of the 'generational imprinting' of political events (Schuman and Scott 1989). Generation theory based on Mannheim's definition has been applied in memory studies to understand differences in attitudes towards historical events and their representation (West and Aarons 2016; Szostak & Mihelj 2017). Meanwhile, studies of the effects of changing media environments suggest that the format of technologies mediating external events during youth may impact on how people relate to them, with the emergence of shorthand terms such as 'digital generation' and 'media generation' (Bolin and Ståhlberg 2015, Buckingham 2006). Mindful of the pitfalls of 'groupism' (Brubaker 2002) in assuming the boundedness of a generation or indeed a diaspora, we seek to contribute to understandings of diaspora as process (Mavroudi 2007) and consider commonalities and differences within the post-

independence generation of Armenians in diaspora, with regard for diversity of family migration histories and host country contexts.

Young Armenians outside the state include those with origins in pre 20th Century diasporic communities in the Middle East, descendants of early 20th Century exiles, and subjects of parental or childhood emigration in the 1990s. Furthermore, diasporic relations are formed in the context of host societies with differing histories of migrant settlement and political links to Armenia. This matters because attitudes in a host state can play an important role in shaping diasporic feelings; for example, nostalgia for the homeland among immigrants in the United States has been shown to be fuelled by attitudes towards non-white groups as outsiders who ought to return to their place of origin (Silva 2009). This study takes the common starting point of a generation having direct and mediated access to a new, increasingly connected, fragile nation-state in youth to explore personal diasporic struggles in relating to Armenia as homeland.

Methods

The data for this study was collected through individual semi-structured interviews between March and July 2017 in France, Russia and the UK. The three states were selected to enable consideration of a wide diversity of experiences, providing very different contexts of organised Armenian diasporic environments and host country links to Armenia. Russia has the largest ethnic Armenian population outside of Armenia, built on migration flows throughout the long history of its relations with the South Caucasus region. Legacies of the common history of the Soviet Union include close political relations between the states, Armenia's reliance on Russia for energy supply and military support, and an ongoing flow of labour migration from Armenia to Russia. As a result, the Armenian population in Russia includes both temporary migrants and settled diasporic communities. By contrast, the Armenian community in France was formed through the substantial intake of refugees fleeing Ottoman Turkey and France today is home to one of the largest Armenian populations in the world, many of whom are descendants of genocide survivors. Finally, the UK Armenian community is smaller but has a long-established history and comprises members with diverse family migration backgrounds, including of refugee migration from the Middle East (Talai 1989). The Armenian church in Manchester, founded in 1870, lays claim to be the first built in Western Europe[v]. Interviews took place primarily in capital cities, but in the UK also in Manchester.

The participants consisted of 26 Armenians aged 18 to 35 raised outside of Armenia and based in one of the three states selected for the study. This age group corresponds to the first cohort of adults to have grown up after the independence of Armenia. The sample size is relatively limited and it should be recognised that the diversity of the diaspora within and beyond these states inevitably extends far beyond that captured. The study takes a qualitative approach, however, and it was not the aim to achieve a representational or exhaustive sample as regards factors such as Eastern or Western Armenian cultural background, generational distance from the event of migration or level of political engagement. Instead, we sought to include diverse backgrounds, seeking understanding of

an illustrative range of experiences from different parts of the community. The selection process targeted Armenians engaged in diasporic activities broadly defined rather than Armenians as an ethnic group or exclusively those who saw the Armenian state as homeland. This enabled us to engage those actively orienting towards an Armenian homeland, however conceived, recognising diversity in this regard, and in line with an understanding of diaspora as a process (Mavroudi 2007). Participants were identified through a snowball approach starting with cross-community events such as genocide commemorations in Paris and a UCL symposium in London, as well as through the researchers' existing contacts among active members of diaspora communities.

Interviews took place in English, French or Russian, depending on participants' preference. Neither researcher is Armenian, a fact conveyed to all participants. The positionality of the researchers in this sense included their perception as 'outsiders', articulated in some interviewees' expressions of surprise and support for wider interest in the experiences of the community. Interview questions were designed to stimulate personal reflection on involvement with the Armenian community, experiences of visiting Armenia, engagement with political developments in the region, and what being Armenian means. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify and structure recurring themes in the interviews (Braun and Clarke 2006). Excerpts have been translated into English where necessary for inclusion in the paper and names changed to maintain anonymity.

Statehood and formative experiences in Armenia

The interaction of myth and memory often came to the fore in accounts of first independent visits to Armenia as young people recalled the emotion of forging a personal relationship with the nation-state. Research has pointed to the impact of diasporic 'heritage tourism' on identity (Basu 2007, Kelner 2010, Abramson 2017). In her study of Armenian 'sojourning', Kasbarian (2018) shows that Armenia can represent a place of diasporic self-discovery and nostalgia, and this provides a motivation for visiting. Expectations based in myths of the state as a unifying and/or long-awaited homeland play an important role in such experiences and their subsequent recollection. In our study, several interviewees highlighted a first visit in late adolescence or early adulthood as having a special and formative significance. The personal meaning of the myth of the state as homeland is seen to link to different family migration histories, inflecting the ways in which memories are recounted.

> Mariam (27, Russia): 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 [Yerevan Summer Internship Program]. 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.

Here, the memory of an active visit to Armenia independent of family ties is highlighted as an eye-opening 'first' experience, bringing a new personal national consciousness. Notably, this is contrasted with the unremarkable ritual of visiting relatives, which the interviewee associates with childhood. Mariam's agency in making the trip is thus emphasised as

contributing to the formative value of the visit. State territorial boundaries frame the space of the homeland with which she feels connected and the experience is recalled as having given her a sense of knowing Armenia as a whole, including the previously unfamiliar.

Family connections and prior experience visiting Armenia, more common among the post-Soviet generation of diaspora in Russia, make her sense of a first independent exploration of Armenia particular memorable. For descendants of genocide survivors, meanwhile, the significance of a first visit often further represented the fulfilment of a symbolic physical contact with the homeland as a national space liberated on behalf of previous generations. Skrbis (2017: 51) observes that 'Once the notion of impossibility of return is overcome, the homeland boundary crossing becomes a symbol of victory and exercise of freedom'. The following extract demonstrates the lasting emotional impact that such an experience can bring. Magar, in his late twenties, recalls his first of many visits to Armenia aged 15, on a trip organised by his Armenian school:

> Magar (28, France): We were setting off for a land that we had the impression of knowing by heart, but that we had never seen with our own eyes. So when I arrived… when I came out of the airport there, I actually felt shivers, 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.

The heightened anticipation of physical contact with a land that de jure carries the symbolic weight of national mythology and group belonging pre-empts a surge of emotion in this account. Although Armenia has been independent for most of Magar's life, the efforts of previous generations to achieve this independence impress upon him on arrival. Situated against the national myth of a painfully lost homeland regained through independence and the symbolism of 'return' journeys, statehood can thus remain, in this context, a new and remarkable situation even to individuals for whom the state has existed throughout their lives. Furthermore, in recalling the emotive experience of the first visit, Magar connects himself personally to his ancestors and to the suffering of exile in the Armenian community of the past. He depicts his arrival as 'the fruit of our battle, our war', implying entry into the sovereign homeland on behalf of generations of Armenians that had longed to return. The significance placed on this experience demonstrates the impact the collective myth of the long-awaited homeland can have on how a first visit to the state is recalled among genocide descendants, and its role in identifying with the state as homeland. Furthermore, in situating himself temporally at the start of a new era of territorial sovereignty in the Armenian national trajectory, Magar asserts his belonging to a particular generation in relation to the community as a whole, one defined by the act of entering the new nation-state, freed from the burden of the wait.

Emotional experiences of diasporic return are diverse and individual (King and Christou 2011:461). Another account of a first visit attributes affective impact to the new experience of immersion in an officially Armenian language environment. Seda made the journey with her parents, but as an adult, and reports consciously facing it as a personal undertaking, preparing her own approach to the 'return'.

> Seda (20, UK): When I did go, I went telling myself: 'have very little expectations, just know that a country does not have to be like the present state of a country, it does not have to be a reflection of how you were raised or how you see it. Just go as a tourist and just go and see what this country's like. Try and be emotionally detached'. But when I got there it was impossible. The minute I got off the plane I was in floods of tears, for some, like, unknown reason. I just started bawling my eyes out, because you sort of got out of the plane and you were greeted in Armenian, you go into the airport and everything is written in Armenian, and I have never experienced a scale of Armenian-ness like that before, so it was really overwhelming emotionally but it was amazing.

As in the previous excerpt, arrival in the airport is narrated as an event triggering a flow of emotion. Notably, Seda recalls trying to avoid the weight of expectation, implicitly based on others' accounts of disillusionment in the myth of Armenia as the idealised, long-awaited homeland. As with Magar, she is a descendant of genocide survivors and has no prior memories of contact with the state. However, myth and memories of mediated experience had already collided in her expectation of Armenia as potentially disappointing. She recalls approaching her visit intent on maintaining a separate, utopian vision of the future homeland based on the myths of her upbringing if she experiences this collision first-hand. In recounting the event, she retains a lasting memory of being unable to resist the affective impact of first arrival.

Here, history and its narration within a community clearly impact on memory of encountering the state and its emotional resonance. For young Armenians descended from genocide survivors, 'return' references ancestral rather than parental links (King and Christou 2011:460). A memorable visit in youth can be particularly emotive for them, as they situate their own experiences within mythical narratives of the fulfilment of return to a restitutive nation-state. While emotional experiences may also be recalled by earlier generations of young diasporic visitors arriving in Soviet Armenia, the place of statehood is distinctive in these interviewees' accounts. For Magar, the fact of independence is essential to the symbolic meaning of stepping onto Armenian soil, while for Seda, it is the standardised markers of nation statehood, such as signage in the official space of the airport, that trigger a response.

Country of residence has been seen to impact on the construction of homeland visits, for example in research by Lev Ari and Mittelberg (2008) on the experiences of Jewish youth from North America and former Soviet countries visiting Israel. The examples above illustrate how family migration histories intersect with country of residence in shaping personal engagement with homeland myths that creates differences in how homeland visits and recollected. In the Armenian context, differences in migration patterns and contact with Armenia between Russian and Western European communities are reflected in assumptions about connecting to the state that young people articulate in recounting first visits. The personal significance of independent exploration of Armenia as homeland in Mariam's account is set in the context of prior family visits more common among the post-Soviet Armenian diaspora in Russia. Meanwhile, for Magar and Seda, whose ancestors fled Ottoman

Turkey and for whom the region is much more remote from family, visiting Armenia stimulates active engagement with notions of the state as a long-lost homeland.

Political self-distancing

Visits to Armenia remain special and infrequent for most. Many interviewees report following media coverage of national events to stay in touch with matters of importance to the Armenian community. As we demonstrate in a separate article, the accessibility of information about political events in the region through digital media brings them closer, while opening doubts about what to believe (Chernobrov and Wilmers, 2019). As a result, the politics of the state feature strongly in participants' reflections on Armenia. While connecting emotionally to Armenia as a symbol of common heritage, many interviewees, in the UK and France particularly, express disconnectedness from or even opposition towards the politics of the Armenian state. A parallel identity of 'state Armenians' – those who live in Armenia – is constructed, which offers only an intermittent sense of belonging for the diaspora, troubling the notion of the state as homeland. While state Armenians are seen in some ways as culturally authoritative and defending the homeland against hostile neighbours, at the same time they are regarded as politically held back.

> René (33, France): They have this Eastern, post-Soviet mentality to make money, make money at the expense of others, while here in the West, well in the diaspora, there's more a vision of an Armenian nation. We're all Armenians, so if we can contribute to the wellbeing, the protection of Armenia itself, we need to do that. It's something that is not followed by the Armenians of Armenia, well, by the Armenian politicians of Armenia.

In this depiction, statehood appears to create new premises for division, enabling conflicting interests to materialise between the local population and the diaspora. This interpretation of memories of direct or mediated encounters with the society is set in contrast to the implicit expectation that statehood stimulate unity, linked to the myth of the sovereign homeland as a haven for all Armenians. As in several interviews in the UK and France, René highlights a perceived difference of historical experience between himself, as a descendant of the old diaspora, and Armenians with a Soviet heritage to interpret the division as a cultural aberration. This reflects a wider tendency among interviewees in these host countries to present Armenian state politics as incompatible with a Western liberal worldview and therefore problematic for them personally. Armenia's Soviet heritage is portrayed as distancing because of the host society values of British and French participants' upbringing, as well as the divergence in historical paths of families that emigrated in different periods. In this way, René and others in the UK and France reproduce the myth of a rightful trajectory for the nation and homeland that can be rejoined if the diaspora can help post-Soviet nationals to overcome the deviation. Here, the agency and perspective of the state's population are excluded, as the problem is attributed to external, historical forces. Self-distancing from the state emerges in particular in young diaspora Armenians' reflections on the Karabakh conflict (Chernobrov and Wilmers, 2019). Such positions led several participants to identify a role for today's diaspora in bringing 'a new way of thinking' (Vazgen,

33, UK) or ‘a vision from the West’ (Mina, 23, France) into the society, characterising the diaspora as Western and progressive in mentality.

The political situation in the home country can lead diaspora members to demobilise as a community. Redclift (2017) illustrates this using the case of Indian Pakistanis in the UK and the US who distance themselves from Bangladesh, from where their families emigrated, because of the marginalisation and deprivation suffered by their community there since the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Likewise, Mavroudi (2018) finds that that concerns about local corruption are a factor in the ambivalence of Palestinians and Greeks in diaspora towards supporting their homeland during times of crisis. In the Armenian case, Ishkanian (2005) describes a similar reticence among diasporans to support poverty alleviation in Armenia due to concerns about corruption. Indeed, corruption, ineffective governance and poverty are often named in the interviews as the most prominent problems facing Armenia today, denying the state its full mobilising potential as homeland:

> Vazgen (33, UK): Every country in the world is corrupt, but Armenia is too small for the level it has, far too small… There's a big disconnect between the people living in Armenia and the diaspora because the people living in Armenia have had years of poverty; they had years of difficulties and they've had to put up with the corruption, the lack of rule or the unofficial rules that hold them back.

Vazgen notes the difference in the environment where state Armenians grew up and the political circumstances in the country. His assessment is one of understanding but it paints state Armenians in a passive role as victims of the political and economic context. This situation is seen to compromise the unity of Armenian culture, undermining the myth of Armenia as a homeland representing the stronghold of cultural – and political – tradition. As Alice (34, France) explains: ‘It gives you a bit of a shock to realise that you’re in that country but the mentalities are not... not as open as in Europe’. Disaffection with the politics of the state through repeated encounters through media communications and visits can therefore render identification with the state as homeland problematic, conflicting with myths idealising it. Marina (25, UK) notes: ‘It is just really hard to identify yourself or to be patriotic when your country is doing something that you completely stand against… politics is just going to take the country a million years back.’ The implicit expectation that diaspora Armenians should identify with the state as homeland, a product of Armenia’s mythical status, underpins her narrative of identification as a struggle.

While disillusionment with Armenia’s politics was often attributed in France and the UK to incompatibility of political cultures along cold war lines, evidence suggests that diasporic mobilisation among Armenians in Russia takes similar forms to that in the West, including on political grounds (Cavoukian 2013). Political disaffection with the Armenian state was indeed found among our interviewees in Russia, though they did not refer to their perspectives as Western or European or allude to differences in values. Instead, criticism often focused on the attitude of elites to the public. Some interviewees experienced the limited scope for the diaspora to influence Armenian society as a form of exclusion. Gagik complains that the diaspora feels unwanted, disconnected and left without purpose by the current policies of the state:

> Gagik (26, Russia): When the government needs it, we are all one people blah blah blah, but when elections come, everything is restricted. Only citizens in Armenia can vote, Armenia has no voting abroad, as that would collapse the current government. A huge number of people left because they were unhappy with the authorities. It works out that the government is only a government of two million people, and yet around the world now there are 10-12 million [Armenians]. We have a state, but the diaspora is just a load of people, pointlessly scattered around the world.

For Gagik, to create a shared Armenian identity around the Armenian state, individual readiness to belong needs to be complemented by political will to include Armenians abroad as meaningful and empowered members of this community. The disempowerment of the diaspora from Armenian state politics prevents this, in his view. In this sense, for Gagik the myth of the state as homeland is compromised by his experience of political alienation rather than by incompatible values. Furthermore, he sees state policies as artificially maintaining the separation between these two alternative Armenian communities. While for descendants of genocide survivors without family connections in Armenia the mythical association between ancestral homeland and state is often problematic, among post-Soviet emigrés it can be taken for granted, as shown here. The geopolitically anchored notion of cultural distance tinging political disaffection among many growing up in a Western European context was absent among interviewees raised in Russia. The interaction between critical attitudes to the state based on mediated experiences and myths of the state as homeland thus varies, affected by both family migration history and host country context.

The limited or unequal mobility between state and diaspora Armenian identities expressed by Gagik is echoed by other interviewees. Political difference and the economic situation in Armenia become closely connected with themes of leaving or not coming back:

> Mariam (27, Russia): The country has many problems. Sadly, we often hear from Armenians there that they want to leave forever. Armenia has an obsolete economy, it's a small country where 10 people own everything… Even the most patriotic-minded people wish to leave.

> Karine (31, France): When I am asked 'you are Armenian, so are you going to move back to Armenia?', this is difficult for me, because this is not my country. This is the land of my heart, but not my country…. There's a big mafia… that's the kind of thing I don't like and the kind of thing that you don't get told, that is about the country and less about the culture.

Both participants contrast patriotism and the feeling of belonging with the country's politics that prevent successful (re)integration. However, moving away or not coming back is a conscious choice regulating the relationship with the state, and does not prevent community mobilisation towards the state as homeland in other respects: even at a distance, an Armenian can remain a 'patriot' and feel a connection to the 'land of my heart'.

The impact of memories of (mediated) experience of the state on distancing from the homeland is more complex among this generation than it might at first seem. Political

criticism of the government is both dissociating and re-mobilising. It creates a barrier between diaspora and state Armenians based on alternative political visions of what the homeland should be. These visions are shaped by the national myth of homeland as a unifying place of sanctuary for all Armenians, mediated by family migration histories and host society politics. In criticising Armenian state politics, interviewees create a politically utopian connection to the country (Walle, 2013) as they share fantasies of what their homeland could become. At the same time, many participants across host societies echo the view formulated by Mariam (27, Russia): 'for me, politics has always been secondary'. Other factors perceived as uniting the community, including shared culture, history, language and personal 'Armenian warmth', come to the fore in mobilising diaspora members and connecting them to imaginings of homeland beyond the state.

Navigating cultural difference

An attraction to spending time in Armenia is evident across the interviews. However, aside from political concerns, aspirations to feeling more connected are complicated by cultural obstacles emerging in recollections of visits and mediated encounters with the society. In cultural terms, the myth of the state as unifying homeland is challenged and qualified in interviewees' accounts of feelings in and towards Armenia. One such challenge is the perception of a more traditional worldview among local peers as a barrier to feeling at home in Armenia.

> Mariam (27, Russia): I realised that in Armenia I don't feel entirely at home, because I'm different now, I'm not like local people, and they show it, and it wasn't only me who felt this - guys from other countries felt it even more, because we are more uninhibited and we communicate differently with people. We have slightly different views; there people still live with traditional Armenian views.

Mariam's self-identification as culturally distanced during her visit to Armenia through an NGO signals a turning point in her relationship to the state. Having emigrated to Russia in early childhood, she reappraises her relationship to Armenia at this juncture from one of local belonging to one of diasporic distance due to cultural difference. Sharing this discovery with fellow travellers produces a new affinity with an international, diaspora-based imagined community. The group experience of disconnection frames her recollection and helps process her disillusionment in the myth of self-fulfilment in reconnecting with the 'homeland'. Contact through an organised programme is one type of experience that can foster ways of understanding Armenian identity beyond a straightforward orientation towards the nation-state. This supports evidence that cultural difference does not exclude a relationship with the state as homeland among Armenians in the USA and can be a route to a 'diasporic cosmopolitan' identity that combines a global humanitarian outlook with a desire to engage with one's roots by contributing to Armenia's development (Darieva 2011). In this way, memory reshapes personal understandings of the state as homeland. Mariam's case demonstrates that this phenomenon extends beyond the Western host state context explored by Darieva and can include those from post-Soviet emigré families as well as descendants of genocide survivors.

For some participants, memories of cultural unfamiliarity in today's Armenian state were entangled with a personal distancing based on family origins outside its territory. Taken together, these sentiments can present complex obstacles to the notion of Armenia as homeland.

> Seda (20, UK): I have had a very Middle Eastern Armenian influence and ultimately there is not as such somewhere in Armenia that I can go back to, that I can say 'oh, the reason my family and I are like this is because of this place'. There is not an area of land in Armenia that exists like that anymore, that has that identity that I myself identify with now. It's now in Turkey, so when I say that the Armenia of yesterday is not the same as today what I mean there is not, I don't feel there is a physical space that contains or demonstrates the qualities and characteristics that I have been raised to have… I mean, of course I go there and it does feel like home. However, I feel such a difference between the post-Soviet Union Armenia compared to before, and I think that is the story of the divide between Armenians who live there presently, and the diaspora.

Seda evokes both spatial and temporal imaginings of her homeland as beyond today's Armenia and presents a personal struggle with the conflicting myths of the homeland of all Armenians embodied by the Armenian state and of the lost homeland in former Ottoman Turkey. Her experience of visiting Armenia and encountering cultural difference is interpreted through a balancing of these narratives in which she identifies Armenia as feeling 'like home', while also asserting her Western Armenian identity and rejecting Armenia as a space that represents her heritage. This negotiation of conflicting narratives of belonging supports evidence that people of migrant heritage can maintain ambivalence and multiplicity of identity by constructing it on an ongoing, unfinished basis (Pfoser 2012). Here, we see how further complexities play out in the case of a state mythologised as a unifying homeland for people born of different generations of migration from different places of origin and settling in multiple host nation-states. In this context, young diasporans' encounters with Armenia are interpreted through a personal navigation of overlapping groups of collective myths. For Mina, these myths mean that understanding the Armenian state as homeland involves an ongoing reminder of cultural loss:

> Mina (23, France): I think that yes, if we have a connection, if you like, with our lands, it´s because we are frustrated. Because our, our cultural capital, well it remains on the other side of the mountain. And I personally find that truly frustrating.

Mina evokes the image of Mount Ararat, official symbol of Armenia and a place of sacred meaning in Armenian culture located within Turkish borders, as a physical boundary, limiting access to the homeland culture. Her reference to 'the other side' indicates the Armenian state as an assumed starting point – the designated homeland - and conjures an image of culturally defining possessions trapped beyond it in Turkey. Rather than rejecting Armenia as homeland, she refers to a frustration at the loss represented by accepting it. This is illustrative of the way in which many interviewees who expressed deep connections to a vulnerable, stateless Western Armenian cultural heritage distinct from the culture of today's Armenia nevertheless took for granted an identification with (Eastern) Armenia as

homeland. This shows the relative strength of the myth of the nation-state as homeland, reinforced for this generation by memories of direct and mediated contact with Armenia, as well as the potential consolidating effects of statehood on Eastern Armenian culture.

Some felt that the state should play a more active role in bridging the divide between the local population and Armenians abroad to support cultural continuity and enrichment across the whole community. These narratives exposed a resistance against the domination of the culture within the state as the focus of the Armenian nation and a reclaiming of diaspora cultures as alternative ways of being Armenian, to be acknowledged and valued in their own right.

> Lily (30, UK): That's another characteristic of the Armenian people. They are a minority everywhere they are, except in Armenia obviously, so that's one of the challenges that we have to deal with, I think, because it is difficult to be a minority, especially when you don't have a country that's either stable or big enough to support the diaspora. I'm not saying they should support the diaspora, but I think there should be a sort of balance between the diaspora and Armenia.

Lily, whose family originated in Ottoman Turkey, asserts a way of being Armenian that does not aspire to 'return' to the state, but to secure diasporic community preservation. Here, the myth of statehood as creating an inclusive homeland for all Armenians appears as an unrealisable expectation. Lily conceives instead a redirection of the community's efforts in securing a prosperous future towards reinforcing cultural continuity in the diaspora. Lily's cousins repatriated to Armenia in Soviet times and she has visited them twice, but in asked to describe what home is to her, she notes:

> Lily (30, UK): Even if there is Armenia… obviously there are things that we are so proud of and that we are attached to, you know, like Armenian churches… but it's hard to think that's actually my home because I never really lived there and my family is not even from there.

Lily references the myth of the state as homeland, suggesting an expectation that she relate to it as such, and appearing to concede some validity to the case for this connection before justifying her feeling of distance. In this way, the presence of the state as a potential homeland can be a discomfiting reference point for diasporic identity.

These excerpts exemplify the diversity of outcomes that emerge from young diasporans' ongoing interpretation of accumulated memories of contact with Armenia through the framework of national myths, shaped by family migration histories. The myth of the state as homeland suggests a cultural unity that can sit uncomfortably with personal experiences of cultural, as well as political difference, particularly for those with family origins outside the republic. The personal negotiation of memories and myths can lead to feelings of attachment to Armenia as a partial homeland or as a place of reconnection with the wider Armenian community or with specific elements of cultural heritage, rather than a place of 'return' fulfilment.

Envisioning the future

In spite of the reservations expressed in relating to Armenia as a homeland, the state is widely seen as a space to be nurtured and defended by the Armenian community at large. Suny (1993:230) writes that Armenia's independence brings the diaspora a new sense of optimism regarding the fate of the Armenian language, history, faith and legacy of diaspora, 'bound up with the stories that will be told in the one Armenia left to its people'. On a pragmatic level, the existence of an Armenian state means not only a space for individuals to connect with their heritage and with other Armenians from around the world, but an orienting focus for efforts to sustain the community longer-term. One reason for this is the conviction that it should offer a possibility to safeguard the longevity of Armenians as a nation, protecting against decline through assimilation.

> Adrien (32, France): Unfortunately, I have the feeling that the diaspora will slowly disappear one day. What will be left in 100 years is… the current state of Armenia. That's what we will have left. What can we do in the diaspora? I have the feeling that efforts will be made little by little to… what to call it… re-emigration, so the return of diaspora Armenians to Armenia.

For Adrien, the priority of preserving Armenian culture means that the myth of the state as a common homeland must guide the community. There is an implied sacrifice in the suggestion that return is the only prospect for the survival of cultural forms cherished in the diaspora. This reflects factors distancing many from the state, including political and cultural factors discussed above, as well as the realities of inequality and corruption affecting quality of life there. For Adrien, the trend towards long-term return is a gradual process that entails managing the ambivalence that he and others have felt in their encounters with Armenia, and remains no more than a theoretical possibility for him personally. Meanwhile, Vazgen sees potential for a state-focused orientation in the diaspora to raise international recognition of Armenians as a nation.

> Vazgen (33, UK): I would want to see Armenia have a bigger influence on the world. We have amazing engineers and scientists that help so much research around the world but it all gets put under the country that they are living in and Armenia is never spoken about. Some of the greatest scientists with the greatest inventions have been Armenians. I would like to see that; I would like to see Armenia put on the map where it belongs.

Here, potential conflict of identities is overcome by the judgment that statehood is an asset to national communities in the current world order of nation-states. Though a descendant of genocide survivors from Western Armenia, Vazgen is married to an Armenian born in Armenia and thus has close connections to the country., He feels that the state provides an avenue for raising the profile of his identity group and promoting new, positive, externally recognised associations with being Armenian. The future is depicted as a further cohesion of diaspora communities with the state and a more assertive identification with Armenia as homeland.

Some participants who did not feel at home in Armenia nevertheless felt that they could

not but be implicated in its fate, given their identification with the nation. The negotiation between reservations expressed about today's Armenia as home and an appreciation of the value of a nation-state that represents the whole community to which they feel belonging is expressed as an ongoing and highly personal one.

> Karine (31, France): Even if the country that is there today is not in the end the country of our great-grandparents after all, well, it's … in the end it's about getting to know it in its reality and accepting it the way it is.

For Karine, alternative ways of being Armenian may continue, but the prominent role of the state in collective consciousness is a new permanent feature to be accepted. The compromise between inherited myths of homeland and experienced realities of the state is therefore resolved for her through a reserved distance, maintaining a distinct diasporic identity combined with an accepted association with the state. As with the preceding excerpts, here we see the dynamics of myth and memory at play ~~and the personal outcomes, continually renegotiated,~~ in young people's self-positioning in relation to the state and to the future of the Armenian nation. The myth of Armenia as homeland is contested by memories of the culture and politics of the state and the desire to preserve different strands of Armenian culture. At the same time, accepting the state as a 'step-homeland' (Kasbarian 2018:359) is understood as an inevitable part of being Armenian today.

Conclusion

This paper situates personal struggles with homeland primarily in the ambivalent dynamics between myth and memory. Growing up with access to an independent Armenian state has given the present generation of Armenian young adults in diaspora new possibilities for developing formative memories of the homeland, shifting these dynamics. Using Bell's (2003) social agency approach to national identity, we have shown that young people re-evaluate and situate the myth of the state as a unifying, long-awaited homeland in relation to their own early experiences of the state. In doing so, they create individual understandings of the state's connection to personal conceptions of homeland.

Family migration histories give different meanings to the myth of homeland, with those with origins in Western Armenia often aware of the mythical loss of a different territory with a distinct dialect and culture from those of the present Armenian state. There are also important differences between how young people living in different states perceive the collision of experiences of Armenia with the mythical ideals of homeland. Indicatively, our interviewees in France and the UK framed this disparity as an effect of the Soviet legacy on mentalities in the state, while in Russia, current government policies and economic conditions were blamed. At the same time, it is clear that for young people of different backgrounds, the existence of the state is significant in grappling with questions of homeland. Repeated conflict between the myth of the state as a unifying haven and distancing encounters with Armenia stimulate young people to revisit unresolved tensions in their conceptions of homeland.

Thus, for young Armenians in the diaspora, the state emerges early in life as only incompletely the object of belonging and satisfaction of longing that received myths suggest. The connectivity now available means that this clash between myth and accumulated memory can become a regular part of their diasporic engagement. As a result, many young people reclaim other ways to identify as Armenian while accepting an imbalance between the currently available sovereign homeland and that of their dreams. Some relate to Armenia as a place of self-exploration, reconnection and limited cultural identification, short of home or homeland. At the same time, a pragmatic attitude towards Armenia as the future of the nation regenerates the myth of homeland to render the state a necessary point of orientation for the Armenian community at large in the face of diaspora assimilation fears.

In light of the ongoing perceived relevance of the state to many young people exploring their Armenian identity, political developments in the region have been and will continue to be watched with interest by many in the diaspora. In April 2018, Armenia's leadership was led to resign by a peaceful anti-corruption protest movement which prepared the ground for democratic elections in which a coalition emerging from the movement gained power. These events have shown that concerns about corruption raised by our interviewees were widely shared within Armenia. As noted by Nieswand (2011) in relation to the Ghanaian diaspora, favourably perceived political change in the homeland territory can lead to remobilisation towards the state. While the challenges of restructuring the Armenian state are still ahead, the new government's actions to date, including the arrest of former officials on corruption charges, have prompted cautious optimism (Lanskoy and Suthers 2019, Feldman and Alibašić 2019, The Fund for Peace 2018). In this context, attitudes to the state's political culture in the diaspora and the barrier that we observed this presenting to identifying with Armenia may be evolving. Taking forward the social agency approach to analyse these developments starting from the interaction of myths and memories, and, crucially, attending to mediated experiences, would bring valuable further insights. Given the active interest and contribution of diasporic actors in supporting Armenia's development, changing attitudes could have implications for future interaction between the state and Armenians abroad.

Finally, the findings suggest ways in which myths of homeland may be problematised by memories of contact with the state more generally among contemporary diasporic communities. Aside from visits, much of the experience of Armenia referred to by our interviewees was mediated by digital technologies, which have increasingly enabled everyday trans-national engagement with political developments in putative homelands. Ambivalent feelings towards the state stemming from differences between accumulated memories of its culture and politics and the ideals of a mythical homeland came with a presumption of agency and choice in how and how much to engage with Armenia, previously unavailable. While it was not within the scope of this study to analyse the use of digital technologies in diasporic engagement, the findings open important questions as to the role of such formats as online forums or news reposting on digital platforms in forming diasporic attitudes towards the state and reconstructing homeland myths.

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Notes

[i] See Bjorklund (2003) for a comparative ethnographic study of Armenian communities in Athens and Istanbul

[ii] The Fragile States Index Annual Report 2019 lists Armenia under the category of 'Warning', noting ongoing insecurity due to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, but registers significant improvement year on year based on the reformist potential of the new government following the 2018 'velvet revolution' (The Fund for Peace 2019).

[iii] Armenian government figures for 2011 state that 35% of the population lives in poverty (National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia 2012).

[iv] Transparency International ranks Armenia 107th out of 180 in the 2017 Corruptions perception Index (Transparency International 2018).

[v] See the website of the Holy Trinity Armenian Church of Manchester: http://www.armenianchurchmanchester.org/our-history/