Dynamics of Diasporas on Digital Space: The Armenian case

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Abstract

The new emerging world order in the post pandemic period which had socio-economic and political impact around the world, significantly affected the (re)imagination and the perception on diasporic identity and belonging. The (re)configuration of the global order and the new reality (re)configured the classic theories of diaspora due to new patterns of migration as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic as well.

In this respect, virtual networking platforms and the internet emerge as important tools that transform the pre-existing ways of communication (Appadurai 1996). Hence, the paper will explore the (re)formation of various Armenian diasporic communities within digital space. In this regard, global Armenian diaspora will serve as a case study to better understand the changing dynamics of various Armenian diaspora communities. For carrying out the research, a combination of quantitative research methods and tools will be applied to understand the socio-cultural and political levels of online engagement with the home country. A historicized theory will be taken into consideration to better understand the conceptual shifts of the Armenian

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diaspora developing new form of diaspora consciousness thus contributing to the broader discourse of diaspora studies.

Introduction: Conceptual shifts of diaspora studies

In order to understand the changing aspects of diasporic communities given the new digital era, I will reflect on the classic theories of diaspora. It will help to understand not only the semantic change of the concept of 'diaspora' but the dynamics of re-territorialising within the digital space.

Until recently, the term 'diaspora' was basically associated with the scattering of Jews, but there is plenty of historical evidences on the Armenian, Greek, and African diasporas also. Since the 1980s the word has been more widely used and this has forced a reassessment of its meaning (Butler 2001: 189). However, theories on diaspora broadly fall into a few categories; for one group of scholars the characteristic features (ethnic myth, religion, language) of the community regarding the host country (Armstrong 1976) are taken into consideration, while another group of scholars try to focus on the push and pull factors of diaspora formation.

Despite various classifications in scholarly literature, it is accepted to note that the concept of 'diaspora' has undergone certain semantic changes within different historical periods. When applying the term 'diaspora' for the ancient Greeks, migration and colonization were implied (Cohen 1997), while for Jews, Africans, Palestinians and Armenians the expression acquired a more disastrous and brutal meaning (Cohen 1997: ix). 'Diaspora' holds larger semantic meanings rather than describing only the dispersion experience of the Jews, Greeks, and Armenians.

Due to the new dynamics of migrant groups and the heterogeneity of migratory movements (Cohen and Fischer 2019: 3), the concept of 'diaspora' is being questioned and problematized. In other words, it may also be argued that as long as "identities are deterritorialized and constructed in a flexible and situational way", hence theories on diaspora should also be in accordance with the changing reality (Cohen 2008: 2). Hence, it should be accepted that 'diaspora' as a concept is itself a complex one with multiple meanings and diverse experiences of belongings.

Ways of various attachments and belongings are (re)shaped as the virtual space expands in the era of globalisation. It is worth noting that Brinkerhoff argues that "migration and telecommunication advancements make diasporas all the more relevant to international affairs" (Brinkerhoff 2009: 3). We may say that the engagement of diasporas in the digital space has been more relevant since March 2020 as the world was locked down due to rising Covid-19 cases.

In other words, one may agree with Ponzanesi that the Internet is not a medium for one-way cultural imperialism. Instead, it provides a platform for global interactions and cosmopolitanism reinforcing sense of national and local identity (Ponzanesi 2020:6) or a sense of collective identity as well (Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010: ix). Moreover, digital space as a virtual 'topos' facilitates the (re)creation of certain cultures and myths by re-territorialising the identity of the members of a diaspora community.

As high technologies and social networking became important, digital diasporas were signified among other forms of diasporas for the (re)imagination

and the (re)construction of the diasporic identity. The engagement with the homeland as well as the loyalty towards it thus shifts to a new level or rather it is reshaped within the online space. Saying this, it is worthy to say that a new diasporic public sphere emerges in the digital space. In other words, as Nedelcu argues, new kinds of 'agoras' have emerged, as various discussion forums are creating new possibilities to express their diasporic consciousness thus becoming visible in the virtual space (Nedelcu 2019: 241).

Digital Spaces and Diasporic public sphere

Some scholars agree (Ponzanesi 2020) that there is no generally accepted definition as to what 'digital diasporas' are, therefore one may find various names for the same, such as 'e-diasporas', 'net-diasporas' or 'online diasporas'. Furthermore, Ponzanesi argues that these diasporas "provide new cartographies to map the self within the patterns of globalisation and localisation" (Ponzanesi 2020: 1). In this regard, we should note that the creation of locality in globalisation is of course contextual.

However, as diasporic communities go online, they eliminate that localization on various social media. This produces a digital public sphere. Eventually, it trespasses the notion of the nation-state as such; through the virtual space the expression of the diasporic consciousness becomes borderless. Nation-states characterized firstly by a fixed territory and the institutionalization of certain symbols also, may lose their primary importance in the creation of the diasporic public sphere on the online platform. Eventually, digital space also becomes a domain where one may observe how 'diaspora transcends the nation-state' (Smith 2003).

On the other hand, it is observed that members of a certain diaspora which were in the margins before, get empowered to some extent through the digital space as competent member of the same community. Within the digital space cultural and political categories of 'ethnicity' and 'race' defining ethnic diasporas also get eliminated in the host country as identities become ambiguous.

Eventually, it turns out that members of a diaspora community communicate virtually with each other without knowing each other by faces. Therefore, we may agree that this dimension also produces an 'imagined community' within this digital space. This also tends to be beyond the boundaries of the nation-state as such and across borders. It is worth noting that though we observe the localisation of the movement, digitally various migrant groups and diaspora communities become more vibrant. Internet becomes both a tool and at the same time a virtual social/ political space that enables connection between various diasporic communities of the same ethnicity.

In this regard, in his *Modernity at Large (*1996*),* Appadurai gives a special focus on the media and migration, considering them as a rupture of modernity. He argues that electronic media cut boundaries, where the audiences and the producers are engaged in various conversations across national boundaries thus growing the number of diasporic public spheres (Appadurai 1996: 22). In fact, the interaction among various diasporic 'beings' acquires a transnational character to a larger extent. In addition to what Appadurai argues, it may be added that the growing number of diasporic public spheres thus provides a platform for digital communities. In other words, the virtual 'topos' connects different identities of diaspora by (re)producing the 'imag-

ined community'.

Moreover, as effective techniques, these online means help the members of diasporic communities to be in touch with the family members in their homelands also. The sense of belonging is being reinforced through cultural engagement in the virtual space as a new trend during the lockdown. For example, during the pandemic a few Armenian music bands, such as the Armenian Soul Band gave live musical performances on Facebook commemorating the 105th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. This shows that Facebook as one of the social networking sites becomes an alternative virtual tool for cultural engagement as a way of reinforcing the shared sense of belonging to one single nation, community, or to the shared history. It also reinforces the sense of national and local identity and gives a platform to global interactions and cosmopolitanism (Ponzanesi 2020: 6). In fact, it may be observed from the above mentioned that the sense of loss is that inevitable element that connects (Pattie 1999) various diasporic communities. However, as it was mentioned, in reality, the members of the nation may not know each other outside the virtual space. This might also explain the complexity as well as the flexibility of the worldwide Armenian diaspora amid its heterogeneity.

In this case, if Benedict Anderson (1983) referred to the creation of the imagined community in relation to the nation-state through print capitalism, then here we should accept that 'transnational communities' as the paradigmatic other of the nation-state (Tololyan 1991: 5) go through the same process. It goes without saying that what Appadurai argues is more accurate. He notes that other forms of electronic capitalism may have even more

powerful effects, for they do not work only at the level of the nation-state (Appadurai 2005: 8). In this regard we come across the term 'technoscape' in his work. Appadurai argues that those are the configuration of technology both mechanical and informational which moves across various kinds of boundaries (ibid.). And he calls them "impervious boundaries" (ibid.). Apart from techno-space which he uses, he notes about the 'ethnoscape', which is a landscape of refugees, migrants, exiles, tourists, and in one word the shifting world (ibid. 33). However, in the current situation, we may accept that the 'ethnoscape' is partially being immersed into what he calls as 'technoscape'.

It may also be well stated that information technologies change boundaries and identity, that are no longer linked or defined by geographical demarcations (Ponzanesi 2020:4,5). In other words, borders are being replaced by networks (Castells 1996), as new patterns of communication emerge giving way to a 'digital community' (Ponzanesi 2020) or 'online community' (Mahmod 2019). In other words, it may also be argued that the diasporic public sphere is being embodied in the virtual networking as the virtual space enables the expression of various ideas towards the home state policies and activities as well. This may be observed for the global Indian diaspora groups also on Facebook. One of them is named *Indian diaspora thanks Modi.* In general, the group is aimed at appreciating the recent steps taken regarding various Indian diasporic communities. Another online platform for the global Indian diaspora worth mentioning is *Indiaspora* on the *X.* Their page description says that it is a nonprofit organisation that inspires the global Indian diaspora to be a force for good. In addition, we may agree

with Alonso (2010) that the internet itself becomes a kind of antidote for the temporal and spatial distancing between diaspora and their homelands caused by dislocation (Alonso 2010: 5). Thus, within the online community building, the rising importance of digital tools may not be neglected for re-shaping national and cultural identities within the digital sphere.

Virtual networking: The Case of the Armenian diaspora

Taking into consideration the current world order, traditional ways of constructing a community identity among the Armenian diasporic communities become challenged to a certain degree in the era of the internet, particularly in the post-pandemic period.

The pandemic period became more challenging particularly in the case of Armenia and the global Armenian communities when in September 2020 a 44-day war broke out in the disputed territory of Artsakh (internationally recognized as Nagorno Karabagh since Soviet Union times) between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Amid the global shutdown and the war, the worldwide Armenian diaspora managed to utilize internet and mainly social media and mobilize on the digital platform despite the political and cultural heterogeneity of global Armenian diasporic communities.

Various Armenian diasporic communities worldwide successfully utilized the digital space as a meeting platform between and among themselves and intersection of different diasporic identities for a common cause. In regard to this, it is worth mentioning that Tololyan (1996) in his article *Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment* considers communication among diaspora communities as one of the main characteristics

of a diaspora. Earlier communities stayed in touch mainly through constant travels, and the Armenian trade communities represented a more successful example. He adds that nowadays communication with each other for the diaspora communities is more common due to technological advancement (Tololyan 1996: 14). This feature assists various diaspora communities to maintain their contact with the homeland by expressing their loyalty towards their homeland (ibid.). One may understand that Tololyan takes into consideration the emotional connection(loyalty) towards the homeland, as he mentions the mythicised idea of the home. However, the events occurred in Armenia will come to show that the mythicised idea of the home and the homeland becomes materialised. This was with the help of digital and online tools among various Armenian diasporic communities.

In other words, it may be accepted that as an important domain, the virtual space (re)shapes the diasporic identities towards learning to be a 'citizen'. Through virtual networking the global Armenian diaspora managed to raise the issue of fair coverage by the international media, ban of artillery and missiles supply to Azerbaijan, fundraising for the destructed towns and humanitarian aid for the displaced families caused by the war, and finally the various online petitions to recognize the Republic of Artsakh and the self-determination of the Armenian population settled there. These actions were carried out mostly on the digital space, as long as due to the global pandemic mass gatherings in many host countries were not allowed. However, the peaceful protest organized by the Armenian community in Los Angeles in front of CNN headquarters is worth mentioning; the two-day protest blocking the roads to the media office with the demand of true and

fair coverage of the war was mobilized through social media and the social networking sites.

All the activities were organized and mobilized basically through the Facebook platform. Once the war broke out, a few people from her area created a Facebook group ("For the Sake of the Homeland") to discuss and prepare for the protest rallies. Interestingly, many of the members of that group did not know each other. To Anderson's argument on the 'imagined communities', I add that this serves as an example of constructing a 'digital imagined community'. Particularly, members of the Facebook group communicate with each other and get mobilized on the digital platform, however in reality they know nothing about each other. In regard to this, Jennifer Brinkerhoff (2009) applies "cybercommunity". She understands it as an online community or organisation, which carries out their activities online. She argues that these communities are created based on the expression of feelings and communication (Brinkerhoff 2009: 86). They eventually develop solidarity among the members. The author adds that the anonymity the Internet gives, provides a space for the members to express personal or collective trauma as they relate to the diaspora experience and the fate of the homeland (ibid.).

The digital activity of the Armenians worldwide became a good example of online lobbying as well, as few Congress representatives came up with announcements in regard to recognizing the Republic of Artsakh. The role of ANCA (The Armenian National Committee of America) was particularly crucial in regard to online lobbying[1]. That included raising awareness for the American-Armenians through their Facebook posts to reach out to their

1 Their Facebook page states the Committee being the grassroot advocacy organisation that represents the views and values of their nations people of Armenian heritage.

government representatives to stop the military support from the US Government to Azerbaijan.

In this regard, one may agree with Brinkerhoff that digital diasporas use the Internet to negotiate their identity and promote solidarity; learn, explore, and enact democratic values; and mobilize to peacefully pursue policy influence, service objectives, and economic participation in the homeland (Brinkerhoff 2009: 2). Online donations by diaspora members were also of importance during the war. For this purpose, the All Armenia Fund was the unified platform where all the donations were being collected. Individual initiatives on Facebook were also directed at collecting funds for the same. Anna's family was one of them. They opened donations on Facebook based on matching; the money collected via Facebook fundraising was doubled by her family and sent to the All Armenia Fund.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that even those Armenian diasporic communities which are relatively less established or not established (such as in Croatia), were also mobilized through digital means. The war brought all diasporic hybrid identities together, which were eventually virtually integrated. Alina Gishyan, who is an active community member in Croatia notes that she got in touch with the members of a very small Armenian community comprising about fifty Armenians. She is herself an active participant in another global online network, Free Armenian POWs Global Network. This group also functions on Facebook, and the decision-making process also happens on this platform. It brings together members of Armenian diasporic communities from more than twenty countries to this single online space. The aim of this group is to mobilize various communities in having

protests in different host countries demanding the freedom of illegally kept Armenian prisoners of war (including civilians) in Azerbaijan. During our conversation, Alina informed me that few of the Croatian politicians also joined their protests. In this respect, one has to accept that diaspora communities are often mobilized to influence international public opinion and build political support for human rights and political freedom in their homelands (Brinkerhoff 2009: 10). Hence, as it was argued, the nation itself is coming to existence through digital ways also, and it is not just territorially embedded (Nedelcu 2019: 245).

Integration of hybrid identities of diaspora members as well as loyalty towards their home country was expressed in giving donations through online fundraising or sending humanitarian aid to their 'homeland'. Nedelcu (2019) rightly notes that this experience represents both the 'virtualization of the homeland' and 'homelandization of the virtual' (ibid. 245), which complement each other in the digital-virtual space. This certainly established their emotional link to their home country, thus emotionally identifying themselves as Armenians. This to my mind shaped a new form of patriotism, which may be rightly called 'digital patriotism' also. On the other hand, this depicts their emotional support also through virtual networking as the easiest way for the same.

However, as compared with the real-life experience, in the digital space cultural differences of various diasporic communities are eliminated. Moreover, in the discussed cases they are not visible to one another. A report which came out amid the war with the title "The Diaspora May be Armenia's Biggest Asset in Nagorno-Karabagh" also mentions about the socio-histor-

ical differences among the Armenian diaspora. Rebecca Collard, the author of the article notes that "…some are descendants of the first exodus, others from Soviet or even post-Soviet conflicts, each with different histories and relationships with modern-day Armenia, but the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is mobilizing and unifying them in unprecedented ways" (Collard 2020).

Apart from the above-mentioned, the case of the Armenian diasporic community in India represents an interesting case of digital engagement with both the 'home' and home country. Armenian lady, Manushak Hovsepian by name, initiated a digital communication to bring together Armenians living in different parts of India. Through regular communication on WhatsApp and meetings over Zoom the Armenians in India maintain a connection among each other by organising online classes of the Armenian language and webinars on Armenian culture. This may rightly be considered an example of a digital community outside the boundaries of the nation-state that seeks to preserve the vernacular thus shifting the reconstruction of the diaspora identity from the geographic 'topos' to the virtual 'topos'.

When some argue that it is another dynamic of cosmopolitan experience that emerged through and within the digital space, I consider that it is a new shift within the heterogenous Armenian diasporic 'beings' or identities across the world in the digital space itself. If cosmopolitan methodology suggests interpenetration of various cultures, or like Ulrich Beck argues "clash of cultures from within one's life" (Beck 2002: 18), then here that 'clash of cultures' may not be observed. Instead, what we observe is that certain diasporic cultures or identities as particularities give way to univer-

salism, becoming invisible amid digital mobilization. Putting differently, certain categories like 'diaspora', 'home' and 'nation' are re-imagined and re-localized due to digital communication and the online, virtual space.

Given the rising importance of information technologies and digital tools, the case study of the Armenian digital diaspora may be interesting from the angle of public diplomacy as well. In this respect, digital technologies, including digital broadcasting give opportunities for not only promoting the local culture of the home country, but also for the advocacy of national cause. These tools, as it was mentioned above, help various diaspora communities to mobilise for influencing the international policy of their host countries. In other words, this enables diaspora communities to influence public opinion.

Such TV and Radio Channels that are broadcast within Armenian diaspora spaces around the world are the *Armenia TV*, *Public TV* of Armenia, *Public Radio*. There are online applications also for the same. Through these channels also the national identity is fostered with the shared cultural belonging towards their home country without the necessity of being present at a certain time in a certain location. We may also note that these online broadcasting enables members of diaspora communities to feel local within the global space.

Conclusion

All in all, the post-pandemic period and the shift in the world order created a new reality, where the role of digital media and hence digital communication are reconsidered to be significant in (re)building community with

the physical distancing shrinking. Subsequently, the Armenian case study makes it clear that being geographically isolated during and aftermath of the pandemic period does not mean being digitally isolated, when in fact it was through digital communication and the digital space that various Armenian diasporic communities were connected and attempted to digitally address the challenges of war.

On the other hand, the case of the Armenian diasporic communities came to show that online platforms create opportunities for the digital diasporic space to eliminate the heterogeneities of the various diasporic communities. Therefore, as the heterogenous identities are integrated within a single digital space, it reconstructs the diaspora communities as a homogenous entity to better direct their efforts on expressing their belonging to the homeland and voicing their socio-political issues. This will also eventually allow us to raise issues concerning the homeland more efficiently from a single digital space. Additionally, the Armenian community in India is another model of community building through online engagement and within the virtual 'topos'.

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