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Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism

Challenges and Opportunities for Digital Diasporas during Covid-19: The Armenian case

Ani Yeremyan

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Diaspora and Transnationalism

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Abstract

Considerable work has been done in the field of diaspora studies recently. Nevertheless, due to the rising socio-economic and political challenges around the world, it is essential to revisit and question earlier theories. At present, when the world is facing a crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in all the spheres of life, most of the activities are moving solely to the virtual networking platform. In other words, the role of internet emerges to be more important nowadays, though already in the early 90-s Arjun Appadurai (1996) expressed the view that the electronic mediation transforms the pre-existing ways of communication. Hence, the focus here is to explore how it affects various diasporic communities. It becomes important to look into and to find out the challenges, as well as the opportunities of such engagement by the diasporic communities amid pandemic. Armenian diaspora will be considered as a case study. It will be attempted to see if new social and political dynamics will enforce re-theorization of the term 'diaspora'. For carrying out the research combination of quantitative research methods and tools will be applied. Historicized theory will be taken into consideration to better understand the conceptual shifts of the Armenian diaspora. In order to understand the changing nature of the diasporic communities on the online platform, content analysis of groups on social networking sites will be carried out. Interviews with some active community members will be another asset to the paper.

Author(s): Ani Yeremyan, PhD Scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University

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Contestations on diaspora

Mobility of people is not a new phenomenon. Since prehistoric times people used to migrate from their place of origin or homeland either for a better life prospect voluntarily or forcefully. In the scholarly literature it is accepted that the word 'diaspora' is of Greek origin, and the word stands for 'scattering', *sperein* (Tololyan1996: 9). Or in other words, it is a 'rupture' from homeland with a certain level of connection with the homeland. Various forms of this dispersal or rupture were characterized differently in the scholarly literature. And that raise theoretical contestations as to what type of community diaspora is, or which elements are characteristics of a diasporic community. According to some authors it is "that segment of people living outside the homeland" (Conner 1986: 16). Based on this, diaspora is simply considered as dispersal, while various factors of that dispersal are not taken into consideration. Until recently, the term 'diaspora' was basically associated with the scattering of Jews, but there are plenty of historic 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 are broadly falling into few categories; for one group of scholars the characteristic features (ethnic myth, religion, language) of the community in regard to 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 '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. Therefore, nowadays the use of the term is very loose, as it has to do with "decolonization", "immigration", "global communications", and "transport". In other words, it is a discourse of multi-locale attachments, habitat, and travelling within and across nations (Clifford 1994: 306).Not surprisingly, due to new dynamics of migrant groups and the heterogeneity of migratory movements (Cohen and Fischer 2019: 3), the concept '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 were gradually (re)shaped as the virtual space was expanding in the era of globalisation. It is worth to note that Brinkerhoff argues "migrationand telecommunication advancements make diasporas all the more relevant to international affairs" (Brinkerhoff 2009:3).Therefore, we may say that the engagement of diasporas in the digital space has been more relevant since March as the world was locked down due to rising Covid-19 cases. To a certain extent it was due to the fact that we observe localization of global migration. The impact of high technologies and social networking became important. And that raised the importance of digital diasporas among other forms of diasporas. 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. As Alonso and Oiarzabal (2010) notes telecommunication technologies do more than enable diasporic communities to connect to their homelands while reinforcing their sense of collective identity

(Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010: ix). If globalisation enables the use of those technologies and that is unquestionable then during this current situation, these technologies become a necessity for various diasporic communities also to facilitate the maintenance of diaspora in relation to the homeland and the host land. Saying this, it is worthy to say that new diasporic public sphere emerges in the digital space. Or in other words, as Nedelcu argues, new kind of 'agoras' are being emerged, as various discussion forums are creating new possibilities to express their diasporic consciousness thus becoming visible in the virtual space (Nedelcu 2019: 241).

Diasporic public sphere

In her article Ponzanesi (2020) argues 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, she 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. And one may accept that due to the current developments amid the pandemic, we observe localization in all spheres as a result of the actions taken by the nation-states. However, what happens is, that as diasporic communities go online, they eliminate that localization on various social media. And 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-state characterized firstly by a fixed territory and the institutionalization of certain symbols also, may lose its primary importance in 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 margins before, get empowered to some extent through the digital space as a competent member of the same community. Eventually, it turns out that the members of a diaspora communitycommunicate virtually with each other without knowing each other by face. 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 localization 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 which enables connection between various diasporic communities of the same ethnicity. In this regard, in his *Modernity at Large (*1996*)*, Appadurai gives a special focus to the media and migration, considering them as rupture of the 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 sphere (Appadurai 1996: 22). And 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 platform for digital communities itself.

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. Physical distancing under these conditions shrinks, something much desired in a pandemic situation. And of course, this helps to have a sense of belonging towards a certain community. On the other hand, the sense of belonging is being reinforced through cultural engagement on the virtual space as a new trend during the lockdown. For example, recently an Armenian Soul Band gave its live musical performance 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 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 which connects (Pattie 1999) various diasporic communities. However, as it was mentioned, in reality the members of the nation may not know about 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) goes 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 to the term 'technoscape' in his work. Appadurai argues that those are the configuration of technology both mechanical and the informational which moves across various kinds of boundaries (ibid.). And he calls them "impervious boundaries" (ibid.). Apart from techno-scape 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 is 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 a way to a 'digital community' (Ponzanesi 2020). In other words, it may also be argued that 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 in regard to various Indian diaporic communities. In addition, we may agree with Alonso (2010) that internet itself becomes kind of antidote for the temporal and spatial distancing between diaspora and their homelands caused by dislocation (Alonso 2010: 5).

Historical Review on the Armenian Diaspora

Many authors believe that since the dawn of their history the Armenian people settled in different foreign countries in massive numbers. There were a number of reasons, but mainly it was due to exile and forced resettlement (Dallakyan 2004: 3).[1] As Panossian rightly notes, writing about Armenia and the Armenians entails writing about dispersion and diaspora (Panossian 2006: 1). The major cause of dispersion was the loss of sovereignty over her territories, invasion by nomadic groupings, until the present borders were fixed in 1921(Walker 1981: 11).Due to historical reasons, out of 11 million Armenians more than 8-8,5 million live outside their homeland. About 3 million Armenians live in the post-Soviet countries, 2,5 million live in

1 The root of the term 'diaspora' that contains the triconsonantal root *spr*, takes various forms with the addition of vowels, as in "spore, sperm, spread, disperse". And the same exists in the Armenian 'spurk' for diaspora (Tololyan 1996: 10)

America, Europe, Near and Far East, Africa, and Australia (Dallakyan 2004: 8).

Being located at the cross roads of Europe and Asia, Armenia had a history of struggle against foreign invaders to preserve the statehood, the faith, the territory, the culture, and finally, the Armenian identity (language, religion, folk traditions, marriage institution within the diasporic community)

Scholarly literature on the Armenian diaspora classifies it as a "victim" diaspora, as a conflict-generated diaspora which served as an example of an "archetypal" (Armstrong 1976: 394) diasporic community. Safran argues that several of the characteristics peculiar to the Jewish diaspora (exile, oppression) is shared by the Armenian, Greek, Chinese, Indian, Palestinian, Parsi expatriated communities as well (Safran 2005: 36). In this respect, John Armstrong, one of the first scholars on diaspora, also notes that the case of the Armenian diaspora possesses a historical significance second to the Jewish one (Armstrong 1976: 394). Cohen also considers the Jewish, Greek and the Armenian diasporic experiences as starting points (classic diasporas) for theorizing diasporas. Certain distinctive features such as coercion, extermination from the homeland (Tololyan 1996: 12-14) are signified. The element of trauma, that resulted in migrations to a few foreign destinations served to classify the Armenian diaspora as a "victim" one (Cohen 2008: 2).

The crucial historical events that led Armenians to be characterized as a victim diaspora was caused by the massacres of the late nineteenth century and the forced displacement (1.75 million people) during 1915–16 by the Ottoman Turks. Dallakyan, an Armenian author notes; "The history of the Armenian diaspora is the history of the survival of the dispersed Armenian people" (Dallakyan 2004: 5). Therefore, the term "diaspora" has often been applied to Armenians both by themselves and by others (Cohen 2008: 48). When comparing the Armenian victim diaspora with other victim diasporas, namely the Jewish one, Cohen referred to the work of Dekmejian. He notes that during the First World War Armenians were indigenous population when they underwent mass deportation while the Jewish were a minority in the Nazi Germany (Ibid. 40). And if the Germans accused the Jewish people to be racially inferior, then Armenians were accused by the Young Turks for their elitism (Ibid.). And as compared with the African victim diaspora, which evolved through a long period of time, the Armenian victim diaspora

was caused by a single traumatic event (Ibid. 42). The Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire was more victimized by genocidal actions due to changes in the state-communities changes as Karen Berkey notes in his book *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Berkey 2008: 114).

It may be rightly argued that due to the extermination and the forced displacement from the homeland, consciousness of belonging and home became prevalent in the construction of the Armenian diasporic identity. Moreover, for the collective identities of the diaspora Armenians (Greeks, Indian, Parsis) the home has been regarded as a "sacred space" and idealized as the only place where they can survive as a distinct cultural or religious community (Safran 2005: 40). However, the consciousness of belonging should not only be understood through the prism of the homeland. Or in other words, it may also be argued that the homeland was a collective representation of not only the territorial belonging but also the linguistic and religious distinctiveness. Linguistic distinctiveness is not only a crucial element of the collective self, but that also allows to preserve the "secular myths" (Armstrong 1976: 395) of the common origin. These myths also help to maintain the connection with the homeland. In its turn this may also allow the diasporic communities to exercise their return to the home not necessarily physically, but ideologically. It may be noticed that online networking sites have become tools for the realization of the home-connect or return to home process during the Covid-19 Pandemic restriction since the last year.

Virtual networking during Pandemic: 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 becomes challenged to a certain degree in the era of internet amid the global pandemic. Pandemic period became challenging particularly in the case of Armenia.

Since March 2020 under the WHO guidance countries have been trying to implement effective measures to tackle the pandemic. As the virus hit Armenia, regular steps have been taken. In September 2020 as minimum number of cases were being recorded, a war started in the disputed territory of Artsakh (internationally recognized as Nagorno Karabagh since Soviet Union times) between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The focus here is to discuss how the worldwide Armenian diaspora managed to utilize internet and mainly social media and mobilize on the digital platform amid Covid-19 restrictions.

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 Powerin the Transnational Moment* communication among diaspora communities considers as one of the main characteristics of a diaspora. Before 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 the 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 about the mythicised idea of the home. However, the recent events occurred in Armenia will come to show that the mythicised idea of the home and the homeland becomes tangible. And this process mainly took place with the help of digital and online tools among various Armenian diasporic communities.

The main issues that diaspora managed to raise through virtual networking were the 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, one needs to note the peaceful protest organized by the Armenian community in Los Angeles, in front of CNN headquarters, when for two days continuously the protestors blocked the roads leading to the media office; they demanded a true and fair coverage on the war. This of course happened due to the mobilization through social media and the social networking sites. Another event was the march of more than hundred thousand Armenians in Los Angeles, which brought together Armenians from various parts of the USA to influence the international community

to take appropriate actions in the favour of democratic values and human rights of the Armenian people living in Artsakh.

Both of these events were actively promoted on social media, and that of course led to the mobilization of the Armenians in various host countries. During our conversationAnna Aghajanyan (who lives in the USA) noted that all the activities were organized and mobilized basically through Facebook platform. She adds that once the war broke out, few people from her area created a Facebook group (For the Sake of the Homeland) to discuss and prepare for the protest rallies. And interestingly, as she notes she herself did not know most of the members of that group. To Anderson's argument on the 'imagined communities', I add that this serves as an example of constructing 'digital imagined community'. Particularly, members of the Facebook group communicate with each other, 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 on-line community or organisation, which carry out their activities on-line. 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. And 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 of recognizing the Republic of Artsakh. The role of ANCA (The Armenian National Committee of America) was particularly crucial in regard to the online lobbying[2]. That included raising awareness for the American-Armenians through their Facebook posts to reach out their government representatives in order 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 were all the donations were being collected. Individual initiatives on Facebook were also directed on collecting funds for the same. Anna's family was one of them.They opened donation 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 the 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 tells me that she herself got in touch with the members of a very small Armenian community comprising of about fifty Armenians. She is herself an active participant of 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 that few of the Croatian politicians also joined their protests. In this respect, one has to accept that diaspora communities are often mobilized in order 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 the 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 is representing both 'virtualization of homeland' and 'homelandization of the virtual' (ibid. 245), which complement each other on the digital-virtual space. This certainly established their emotional link to their home county, thus emotionally identifying themselves as Armenians. This to my mind shaped a new form of patriotism, which may be rightly called as 'digital patriotism' also. On the other hand, this depicts their emotional support also through virtual networking

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

as the easiest way for the same.

However, it is considered as compared with thereal-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-historical 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).

When some argue that is another dynamics of cosmopolitan experience 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 on 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 the universalism, becoming invisible amid digital mobilization. Putting it in a different way, certain categories like 'diaspora', 'home', 'nation' are being re-imagined and re-localized due to the digital communication and the online, virtual space.

Conclusion

All in all, the global pandemic created a new reality, where the role of the digital media and hence digital communication are reconsidered. As it was mentioned above, it makes physical distancing shrink. And after all, the Armenian case study makes it clear that geographically isolated during this period does not mean digitally isolated, when in fact it was through the digital communication and the digital space that various Armenian diasporic communities are connected despite physical and geographical barriers.

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 heterogeneities of the various diasporic communities. Therefore, as the heterogenous identities are integrated on 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. This will also eventually allow to raise issues concerning the homeland more efficiently from a single digital space.

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