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“Being Armenian is a Package”

*Some critical issues
facing Diaspora
organizations today*

By Hratch Tchilingirian

“For me, being Armenian is a package.... I think it is a matter of deciding. When you decide to be Armenian, that’s it, you are Armenian.” This is how a young Armenian man in Lebanon perceived his identity. Indeed, being Armenian in the Diaspora is a “package” that contains different things for different diasporans. If in the traditional perception of identity—articulated by the church, political parties, voluntary associations and other collective structures—the idea of choice did not figure into a definition of what it means to be an Armenian, today Armenian identity is a matter of choice for the vast majority of Armenians in the Diaspora. Rather than an obligation or duty, the post-genocide third and fourth generations participate in and contribute to community life as a matter of choice. They choose to be associated or connected with things Armenian or be involvement with other Armenians.

Even as in the past “Armenian identity” was articulated, rationalized and promoted by the intellectuals and community institutions in the Diaspora, in the 21st century there are, arguably, as many definitions as there are Armenians. These include, for example, hyphenated Armenians (American-Armenian, Romanian-Armenian, Argentinian-Armenian, etc.), percentile-Armenians (half, quarter, 1/8 Armenian, etc.), as well as the Islamicized or “Islamized Armenian” category, which is discussed more openly in recent years. Indeed, the evolving concept of “Armenian identity” is the core of virtually all themes in diasporic life, which is often self-defined, fluid, and personalized. Another diasporan in Paris described himself as “French of Armenian origin” and noting that his homeland is comprised of both France, where he lives, and Armenia as a whole, including Mount Ararat. Armenian identity today is, indeed, intertwined with the local identities of the societies, cultures, and countries where Armenians reside or are born.

Our knowledge about the views and opinions on identity and related major themes—such as language, culture, religion, community engagement, and relations with Armenia—have been enriched because of the Armenian Diaspora Survey (ADS): an unprecedented multi-community and comparative study conducted in 2018-2022, based on the latest Social Scientific methodologies and innovative approaches. The idea of a survey was first discussed in 2017 at a meeting in London,

organized by Razmik Panossian, the director of the Armenian Communities Department of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. A score of scholars and academics, who had studied the Armenian diaspora over the years, came together to discuss and develop a research project, which soon turned into a full-scale three-year research program in 2019, following a pilot study in 2018 in four diaspora communities: Boston, Cairo, Marseille and Pasadena. The Armenian Diaspora Survey was fully funded by the Gulbenkian Foundation and the Armenian Institute in London was chosen to be the administrative home of the project. The first of the three-round survey was conducted in 2019 in Argentina, Lebanon, Montreal, and Romania; the second in 2021 in Belgium, Paris, United Kingdom and Rostov on Don; and the third in 2022 in the United States and Ontario, Canada. More than 50 diaspora communities in 10 countries were included in the survey, with a total of 13,000 participants and 400 qualitative interviews.

The statement of a respondent in Marseille captures one of the critical aspects of ADS: "In 67 years," he said, "it's the first time I'm asked what I think, what I wish." Indeed, the survey was an opportunity to systematically and critically ask, learn and address the views, opinions and wishes of Armenians spread around the world. While there are many studies on particular diaspora communities and selective themes in the Diaspora, ADS focused on studying the public opinion of diasporans. Diaspora organizations or institutions rarely ask members of their communities about their thoughts on certain issues or their views on questions pertinent to the vitality of their community. Thus, ADS fills a huge gap in the knowledge about the Diaspora.

The results of the survey (2022, 2021, 2019, 2018 pilot) have been published and are freely accessible to the public. In its entirety, the study offers a unique snapshot of diaspora public opinion, shedding light on the prevailing views and sentiments within the Armenian diaspora on various issues. More critically, ADS provides evidence-based knowledge to the public in general and a vital tool for leaders, activist, and policymakers to better understand and analyze their communities and develop new programs or projects.

Indeed, across the board in all communities included in the survey, one common concern that is high on the scale is the "lack of strong, visionary leadership" in their community, even as nearly 8 in 10 are not affiliated with existing community organizations. Another concern, especially in the larger communities of the US and Canada, is being a "disunited or divided" community. The survey results also show high demand for more interesting Armenian educational and cultural activities and programs.

Against this background and knowledge, one might ask what are some of the critical issues facing Diaspora organizations and institutions today?

To start with, perhaps we could state the obvious: the fostering, nurturing, and constant vitalization of the "Armenian" aspect of diasporic identity should be part of the *raison d'être* of organizations and institutions—because all other aspects or fields of Diasporic life orbit around "Armenian identity". As I have argued elsewhere, the realities of the 21st century require a new thinking and understanding of identity

from the perspective of the specific places and context where Armenians live rather than on the basis of the rigid binaries of the dominant institutional discourse. In the 21st century, the "Armenian" bit of identity is about connections, relationships, and occasions in diasporic life. It is about connecting with an Armenian meaning-system that is larger than an individual's personal world.

Global changes and developments in recent years have an impact on Diaspora organizations and institutions. The impact on their purpose and functioning are rarely analyzed. Today, internally, they are affected by the post-44-day war and ethnic cleansing in Artsakh and Armenia's long-term development and security concerns. On the political level, Armenian political parties have serious divisions and disagreements within themselves, which affects their activities and effectiveness. Externally, they are affected by enormous political, military, economic, environmental, ideological and other changes around the globe. Often there is lack of appreciation and thinking about the fact that diaspora communities, in addition to "Armenian issues" or concerns, have to deal with local concerns on a daily basis in their own countries, such as socio-economic challenges, political turmoil, etc. Being Armenian-American or French-Armenian is not about changing "ethnic" hats, but the two identities go arm in arm, and "loyalty" is due to both at the same time.

Two other important developments in contemporary diaspora life must also be given serious thought by Armenian organizations. The first is geography (distance). With the increasing geographic expansion and dispersion of communities, the traditional physical presence in a given town or neighborhood is no longer serving the needs of the entire community. Technology and social media are providing new and exciting ways to communicate and to transmit, but also posing huge challenges to organizations. How to reach their constituents? This is also causing fragmentation of efforts and resources. The challenge of geography is eclipsed by the change of funds and funding. The state of the global economy on one hand, and the after effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the other have impacted the financial health of organizations and institutions in the diaspora. Given Armenia's realities, as well as the challenges in their respective countries, the diaspora organizations, once again, are faced with difficult choices: between assisting the Republic of Armenia and Artsakhtsis and keeping Armenian identity vital in their local community in the diaspora.

Perhaps the starting step for Armenian organizations in the diaspora today is a genuine self-assessment—reassessment and analysis of the purpose, goals and output of their organization in the coming years. Given that being Armenian today is a matter of choice, Armenian organizations need to offer an attractive choice of engagement, membership or contribution. It is not enough anymore to preserve venerable organizations in the diaspora because of their historical contribution. The question is how do such transnational and local institutions find purpose and function in the present and the foreseeable future. A process of reassessment would mean bringing together and utilizing the knowledge, experience, talents and resources of a wide range of individuals and not organizational navel-gazing.