



## ARMENIAN RETURN MIGRATION IN THE DISCOURSE OF LOCAL ELITE

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### Abstract

The study is based on interviews with 32 experts on international migration conducted in Yerevan in 2016. This paper aims to analyse their perspectives on return migration, which go beyond the dichotomy of the return as a failure or success. Armenia has a large diaspora and only few migrants and members of the diaspora decide to go back. However, there are such cases and they merit our attention and further analysis. The transnational turn in migration studies showed the importance of the return and the ways how the migration cycle can never be completed. Narratives among the key informants revolve around the issue of old and new diaspora and diasporic consciousness (or patriotism), the issue of a weak state after the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, and uneven development. All of these themes incorporate the top-down and bottom-up perspectives, even though they are a part of the discourse of the key informants working on migration issues and members of the local elite. This study will also highlight the significance of return migration and the Armenian diaspora for the Armenian society's changes.

### Keywords

return migration, diaspora, transnationalism, elite discourse, Armenia

## INTRODUCTION

Migration represents an important part of Armenian culture, which led to the formation of a large diaspora community around the world (Thomas et al., 2018). The so-called classic Armenian diaspora was established after the 1915 Armenian Genocide. It came into being after escaping violence in the Ottoman Empire *en masse*. There was also significant migration after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A negative net migration rate in Armenia makes return migration


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particularly important (Macková and Harmáček, 2019). The population of Armenia is very homogeneous and return migration increases the population in the country. Despite having limited data on return migration to Armenia, it seems that Armenian return migration has been growing steadily in the past years (Fleischer, 2012). There are different groups of returnees to Armenia. Probably the largest group is represented by the seasonal migrant workers who return from Russia. Most of the research so far has focused on this type of seasonal migration. According to the Returned Migrants' survey (European Training Foundation, 2013), Russia was the first destination country for 85% of the returned migrants. Moreover, a large percentage of the returnees considered re-emigration in the future – 68% of the returnees intended to migrate again (European Training Foundation, 2013). However, migrants to Russia usually spend less than one year abroad. There is also a number of returnees from the European Union states and other countries, which is significant for the phenomenon of return migration to Armenia.

## OBJECTIVES

The reality of return migration can be mixed or blurry. That is why we pose the following research questions: *In what ways do the experts view the issue of Armenian return migration? What are the key narratives which are stressed by the experts and the discourse surrounding Armenian return migration?* We uncover that the issues pertaining to return migration are interconnected with Armenian society in many different ways and reflect its understanding on profound levels.

The aim of the paper is to discuss the issue of Armenian return migration in terms of its volume, composition and type. In the methods section, we discuss the selection of research participants, their numbers and relevance to the work on return migration. Afterwards, in the results section, we aim to show the various ways how return migration is represented by the experts. The main narratives – around the issue of patriotism, the weak state after the end of the former Soviet Union, and uneven development will be discussed from the point of view of the experts. Finally, this paper aims to tie their narratives into the broader literature on return migration and diasporic communities.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are two main international migration theories that deal with the return and explain it differently (De Haas et al., 2015). The former is the neoclassical economic theory and the latter is the new economics of labour migration (NELM). The neoclassical economic theory looks at the return through the prism of failure. It argues that the migrant failed to achieve his or her goals and therefore, was compelled to return. This theory maintains that people migrate in order to maximise benefits by moving to places where they can achieve higher productivity



(Harris and Todaro, 1970; Massey et al., 1998). According to this theory, migrants would integrate successfully in their countries of settlement and would be more productive than in their countries of origin, so there would be no reason for returning. However, migrants might not be able to find employment or may not improve their lives through migration. As De Haas et al. (2015: 416) put it, 'while "winners" settle, "losers" return'. The prism of migration as a failure is dominant in the discourse of various agencies which work with the returnees through AVRR (assisted voluntary return and reintegration) programmes.

The new economics of labour migration (NELM) theory argues that international migration is a livelihood strategy employed by households and families to diversify risk and overcome market constraints (Stark, 1991). In the countries of origin, there is often a lack of insurance and obtaining adequate credit is difficult. Having a member of the household abroad aims to overcome these issues. Thus, the main motivation for migrants is to improve the situation in the country of origin and they can return if they have accomplished their goals. Therefore, under the NELM theory, return signifies a measure of success. One study that combines both the neoclassical economic theory and NELM is the study by Constant and Massey (2002). This study enquires about the likelihood of return among migrants in Germany. The study found that both neoclassical economic theory and NELM are important for future return intentions. Therefore, it seems likely that there is no single way how to explain return migration because of different backgrounds and motivations of migrants. However, both theories might provide a useful explanation tool depending on different contexts.

Return migration represents just one possible path in the life-paths and motivations to move and can follow a stepwise pattern of migration. Uher and Ira (2019) investigated time-space behaviour patterns among migrants from former Yugoslavia, considering many different spatial and temporal scales. Similarly, in the case of Armenia, there are different motivations for return that will be discussed in this paper. According to the literature, there are different categories of return on the continuum between 'return of success' and 'return of failure'. Two main typologies are presented by Cerase (1974) and Carling (2004). Both authors present one type of returnee – 'return of failure' or 'empty-handed returnees' as an example of failure while migrating. The other polarity 'classical returnee', 'return of conservatism' or 'return of retirement' represents a more positive view of return migration. The opposite of the return of retirement can be seen in the migration aspirations of pensioners (Pytel, 2018).

Repat Armenia, an organisation which helps skilled return migrants establish themselves in Armenia, registers 1 000 to 1 500 voluntary return cases to Armenia per year (respondent 15). However, this number excludes the Syrian Armenians whose numbers could be up to 20 000 (Al Jazeera, 2017) as well as involuntary returns due to deportations, especially from the European Union countries.



According to the Armenian Ministry of Diaspora, 65 000 returnees have returned to Armenia since the early 1990s but only 35 000 remained there (respondent 2).

For example, Pawlowska (2017) argued that American Armenians who repatriated tried to distance themselves from the local Armenians and were forced to renegotiate their identity. She also inquired about the ways how return Armenians were challenged by the local narratives. Pawlowska (2017: 106) notes that by the word development 'repatriates meant mostly growth in terms of economy and the human development index, which means external categories used by most of international organisations, not local standards of positive change and improvement.' Moreover, returnees emphasized personal sacrifice of having to build a new life in Armenia including a more challenging career search, rather than using the comfort of their established lives in the US. The research done by Pawlowska focused on the 'returnees' who were from the second or third generation of migrants. These people have not actually lived in Armenia before moving there which might have impacted their perception of the country and their feelings of isolation.

In cases of unsuccessful asylum applications or visa termination, the migrants can benefit from the so-called assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) schemes run by international organisations such as IOM or governments of different European countries (Belgium and Austria, among others). However, it is questionable to what extent these schemes are voluntary, as many returnees can be forced to participate in these programmes under different circumstances (Lietaert et al., 2014; Koch, 2014). Upon their return, the returnees can receive social as well as medical assistance. These programmes can involve a business component that helps them with vocational training and small grants or loans for setting up their own businesses. Some of the returnees from Russia can also benefit from similar reintegration programmes (respondent 17). The Armenian return migration comes in many forms – from the labour migrants from Russia, spontaneous returnees with diverse sets of backgrounds coming from different states to AVRR returnees.

## DATA AND METHODS

Interviewing in migration studies is much more than 'having a chat' although good social skills and the right atmosphere are certainly helpful in conducting interviews (Hay and Cope 2021). We have used an interview guide in order to carry out semi-structured interviews. The questions asked in the interviews focused on the theme of return migration to Armenia and dealt with the issues deemed pertinent to the research question. The first period of fieldwork in Yerevan took place between July and September 2016. During this time, key informant interviews with 32 experts on international migration were conducted. Dexter (1970: 136) defines interviews with experts as a 'conversation with a purpose'. The key informant is able to supply information regarding the research topic and can serve as the point of



entry into the field. Moreover, the interviews with key stakeholders can serve as 'crystallisation points' for insider knowledge (Bogner, Littig, and Menz, 2009: 2). The semi-structured interviews discussed several key themes surrounding return migration to Armenia and focused on the complexity of the phenomenon and eliciting answers to the research questions.

Most organisations dealing with migration, state institutions, and academic institutions in Armenia have their headquarters in the capital so that is why all interviews happened in Yerevan. The majority of interviews were conducted in English. In a few cases, they were in Armenian with the help of an interpreter. The interviewees were selected due to their engagement with the issue of international migration and included employees of state authorities, international organisations such as the agencies of the United Nations, non-governmental organisations, and academic institutions (Tab. 1). Interviewees were selected through snowball sampling (Creswell, 2002) and personal and organisational networks. All interviews have been recorded and transcribed. A narrative analysis was used to analyse the interviews.

**Tab. 1** The key informant interviews according to their institutional affiliation

Institution	n
Non-governmental organisations	12
Governmental organisations	6
International organisations	5
Private sector organisations	4
Academic institutions	3
Diplomatic representations	2
Total	32

Source: Authors

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

There are different perspectives of return that have been highlighted by the key migration theories. The situation in Armenia showed that return could be viewed both as a success and a failure. It depends on the category of the returnee but also the point of view of the interviewee. While some state, *"We can say that the people who return have not been very successful"* (respondent 3), others claim that there are success stories, for example, brands or businesses run by the returnees. Respondent 24 mentions, *"the wines that have been winning medals on international fairs (...) Tierras di Armenia brand. There is Karas wine, the Yerevan brandy, which are all successful."* At the same time, this person mentions that *"there is a need to work on favourable investment climate."* Another respondent (14) highlights a café which



was established by a returnee. *"For example, the Greenbean café is a non-smoking café and is a successful example of this. As soon as you create a precedent, people start looking at you and then they copy you."* Therefore, the issue of social remittances or the transfer of norms can also be attributed to return migration (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011). In the following section, we will look at the narratives of return migration, which highlight the complexities of this phenomenon. Three main narratives – ones of patriotism, weak state and underdevelopment pave the way for our understanding of return migration to Armenia.

### **Narrative of patriotism**

In various interviews, the respondents stressed the importance of patriotism for return migration, and some respondents mentioned some key figures among the diaspora Armenians and returnees from the diaspora. While for some returnees, patriotism can play a role in the decision-making process, others might find it hard that it obfuscates other reasons to return. It seems that it might not be the single most important pull factor despite the rhetoric. Respondent 3 stated that *"the biggest motivation for return is patriotism. I know about families who returned from the USA and worked for a lower salary. Their motivation was to make an investment in Armenia."* The same respondent also mentions external pressure on other groups of returnees. *"Another group is people who have been obliged to return because their visa has run out, etc. (...) This situation creates financial and psychological problems."* Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the return motivations, which can be internal (such as patriotism) or forced by external circumstances. The type of return, which can be forced or voluntary, determines the role of patriotism in it. For voluntary return, patriotism was even more significant than for the forced one, where it played a much lesser role.

Another respondent (5) states that the return motives can be connected to *"raising children in Russia (which) is seen as risky. There are fears for identity of the children and finding the right partner."* Therefore, the motives relating to the family, upbringing and future plans can be connected to patriotism. Moreover, respondent 5 further claims that some people invest money in Armenia *"so they are at least symbolically here."* Then she goes on to present a case of her relative, who organized an IT business in Armenia, *"Maybe a part of the reason was patriotism. Nostalgia is a part of Armenian identity, but physically returning to Armenia is not that important."* Therefore, there is a mix of motives, including further economic opportunities and entrepreneurship. The quote that physical return is not that important for the diaspora is significant for the transnational ties that returnees have (Lietaert et al., 2017).

One of the respondents (30) was a returnee himself. He returned from Lebanon several years ago and recalled the relationship of patriotism towards return. He also brings in the narratives of a nation as a mother. He states, *"The elders said:*



*'You have to go back to Armenia. You have a host motherland (Lebanon).'* But I do not understand how can that be a host motherland, it is like a surrogate mother when you have to go back to your real mother." He expresses the ambiguity many returnees face after a prolonged period of absence.

Furthermore, he discusses the role of diaspora organizations and the role of patriotism in it. One particular organization that he worked with was based on the aspirations to help with the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh and help wounded soldiers' families. He proceeds to add, *"There is only a limit to what you can do without being here. It was a dream to come back. (...) The political ideology was to help. There was a national agenda. To sacrifice, to have national aspirations, support each other. (...) The motives are based on the nation."* For some returnees, patriotism can play an important role in return, yet others are more pragmatic. The experts working on migration issues in Armenia stressed mostly the economic opportunities (not) awaiting return migrants.

Respondent 7 states the following concerning return motivations, which combine both economic opportunities and patriotism: *"I think that economic opportunities are the most important. Patriotism can play some role. But you find very few people that would trade their standard of living for patriotism and live in poverty."* This respondent also mentioned the hope of economic prosperity which was seen as the motivating factor. Therefore, patriotism is possibly not the only factor. Many experts believed that economic opportunities were the key to encouraging return migration. The next narrative, the one of a weak state, undermined the efforts of attracting returnees to Armenia and frustrated some of the returnees.

### **Narrative of a weak state**

The weak state was mentioned several times as an obstacle to sustainable return. One of the problems respondents mentioned was the rigidity of the state. This sense of dissatisfaction with the way the state works is connected to the issue of return migration and perceived shortcomings of the state institutions. Respondent 20 stresses that *"people are afraid of mobilizing their resources and being creative and the government is afraid of supporting the creative industries because these are the areas that challenge the governmental structures. However, it is going in this direction anyway, even without the support of the government"*. Respondent 18 added that *"you need to invest in people, the right opportunities and the best way to do that through the state. I know it's difficult in a country like Armenia. (...) Especially in Armenia, people use examples of Singapore or Israel, these miracle success stories, maybe Rwanda, but in all those cases, there is a very strong state. I think it has to be the same here."* Therefore, the issue of a weak state is connected to the lack of economic incentives but also perceived dissatisfaction with the economic situation.

The Armenian state remains weak vis-à-vis the transnational diaspora. Respondent 27 states that *"with the independence of Armenia, there was more*





support. A lot of the diaspora support is done informally. We know that the situation concerning development needs more help and this is one of the things we want to concentrate on. The challenges here are too big. We bring people here but we need to do more. We need a good and open economy.” Respondent 23 adds, “There are no economic opportunities here, all they have is go[ing] to Russia and they keep going, even with the economic crisis. There is less money to send, so the new trend is that now fathers and sons go to provide assistance to their families. Sometimes families even have to send money to Russia. (...) Many Armenians stay in Russia because they do not know if they would be allowed to go back. The whole family joins so it becomes a permanent migration.”

The economic issues are connected with corruption. Respondent 30 claims that “the problem is that you will never achieve your goals if you are weak. So if you close your eyes on corruption, this mismanagement we have here, you will never have a strong state. And if you don’t have a strong state, that state will never really be respected by the international community and its cause will not be heard. So instead of going to the US Senate, House of Representatives or the French Parliament and advocating, strengthen your country here. Help this country.”

Respondent 27 further reflects on this issue. “It is tough to have our own state in the last 25 years. Before the mentality was that you could blame everything on the empire. The nation was not ready for internal transformation. Some important national issues will need help from the outside.” Therefore, Armenian return migration is also influenced by the state, which is perceived to have shortcomings. The final narrative of the perceived economic underdevelopment of Armenia is also connected to this issue.

### **Narrative of (under)development**

The interviewees discussed the overall situation in Armenia, encompassing economic, social, and structural aspects that contribute to the challenges of returning to the country. The narrative of (under)development is connected with some aspects pertaining to (return) migration and development, such as remittances used by the migrants and returnees but also other key issues, such as infrastructure, which might also relate to the role of the Armenian state discussed above. For some respondents, the issue of remittances connected to return migration played a significant role.

For example, one respondent who worked in an organization active in rural regions highlighted the role of remittances. Respondent 6 claimed: “We were working with the migrants’ families who receive remittances to inspire them, to have the idea that these remittances should not only stay in the shops. You can collect them, you can save them, and make investments. We give them the grant but they also have their matching fund, which is formed by remittances and this is the kind of idea to show that these remittances can really work if they’re directed towards local economic





*development.*" Therefore, the idea that returnees (or families of migrants) can use remittances to encourage local economic growth is quite prevalent. The idea was supported by other experts on migration in Armenia and also other research discussing the role of remittances in Armenia (e. g. Grigorian and Melkonyan, 2011). However, this topic is only discussed in relation to rural regions, which should be "developed" by means of development projects. Some of them are related to the agricultural sector, which seems to struggle in Armenia. As explained by respondent 24, *"there are still some gaps in the policy. The problem is the interest rates of agricultural loans. Trust is the biggest obstacle. They (the farmers) only try to survive. Every time they cultivate, there is more debt."* Yet agriculture is offered as one of the avenues of further engagement to some returnees, especially those benefitting from the AVRRE projects.

There are other projects run by different organizations targeting sectors such as tourism. Respondent 20 added, *"With socio-economic governance, we're starting a project on local tourism development, just trying to provide alternative income generation means for local communities that are not self-sufficient. Tourism is, from my mind, one of the key growth areas for Armenia. It can grow a lot of attention, and (the project) is trying to tap into that. Of course, not everywhere will be a successful tourist hotspot but there is definitely room for growth. The problem is the infrastructure, the poor roads."* Therefore, the issue of perceived (under)development connects various aspects of return migration and also the perceived issue of a weak state. Yet it is mainly discussed in relation to the rural regions in Armenia. The interviewees mentioned that not just development projects but also investments in infrastructure could also encourage return migration and businesses run by the returnees. This issue is connected with urban evolution in the post-socialist countries due to the specific nature of social, economic and political conditions in this geographical space (Havryliuk et al., 2021).

## Discussion

Armenia is generally supportive of the return of its citizens (as has been stated in its 2017-2021 Strategy for Migration Policy of the Republic of Armenia). However, only a few resources are offered to the prospective returnees. So far, there are mixed narratives of return as a success or failure and it is important to move beyond this dichotomy of return. While in some cases, the interviewees mentioned the hardship encountered by the returnees, in others, they highlighted the success stories and the presumed skilfulness of returnees who were able to get around the economic situation and use it to their advantage. This is in line with the statements of respondents who claimed patriotism only motivates a minority of the returnees and the economic incentives are even more important.

Interestingly, the issue of a weak state was also put vis-à-vis the diaspora, which was perceived as weakening Armenia in the narratives. National identity



and its formation were not limited to the nation-state and could be transnational, as evidenced by the heavy presence of the word diaspora in the local discourse. The Armenian diaspora is an important part of the narrative of its inception and is connected to genocide in 1915 (Safirstyan, 2011). Another important milestone connected to Armenian migration is the dissolution of the Soviet Union (preceded by the devastating Spitak earthquake), which also caused economic upheaval in Armenia. The conflict in Nagorno Karabakh also led to the narrative of mobilisation of resources, which was an important part of how return migration to Armenia had been viewed. All of the crises are connected to the rhetoric of patriotism. Pawlowska (2017) showed that the returnees to Armenia worked with the external categories of human development, which were used by international organizations. Many of the experts interviewed for this paper worked in local and international organizations in Armenia, and they used the language connected to development. The development projects targeting returnees are often implemented in the rural regions, yet without considering that many returnees wish to remain in the capital. The migrants and returnees are viewed as “the heroes of development” (De Haas, 2012) as long as they send remittances or use them to encourage local economic growth.

The issue of remittances is one of the cornerstones of the literature on migration and development and recently, the literature on social remittances has become more prominent (Levitt, 1998). Yet social remittances are more difficult to measure. One of the ways how they can be understood is the perception of the returnees towards the state institutions in comparison to people who never migrated. Many experts on migration in Armenia mentioned the term “weak state,” which can mean anything from state capture, rigid state institutions, or corruption in daily life. It can be the reason why some returnees are dissatisfied with the situation in their home countries. For example, Paasche (2016) inquired about the returnees from Europe to Iraqi Kurdistan and their sense of dissatisfaction with corruption and a more critical approach towards the state. Similarly, some experts in Armenia challenged the state and the work of state institutions and positioned themselves vis-à-vis the state.

## CONCLUSIONS

Currently, significant changes are taking place in Armenian society. Important narratives of the members of the local elite shed some light on the changes taking place in connection with return migration. This paper discussed the role of return migration to Armenia through the lens of the experts working in the field of migration in Armenia. The respondents worked in different organizations, including state agencies, international organisations, international and local non-governmental organisations, academic institutions or diplomatic offices. All of them were familiar with the issue of return migration to Armenia and discussed multiple meanings which relate to return migration to Armenia. The discussions



with the experts revolved around three critical narratives—the narrative of patriotism, the narrative of a weak state, and the narrative of underdevelopment, which represent unique challenges for the returnees. Future work in this area can inquire about the role of social remittances in return migration and the narratives that are shaped by returnees. Possible transnational aspects of these narratives and the meanings ascribed to them by the returnees are also to be uncovered in future work.

In 2021, Armenia was among top 5 countries that had most returnees in the region of South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe and Central Asia and received assistance from the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2021). Among the regions where most returnees came from were Russia, Europe and the United States and Canada (Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, 2022). Therefore, this theme continues to have a high relevance in today's world.

As stated by King (2002: 89), “new forms of migration derive from new motivations (...), new space-time flexibilities, globalization forces, and migrations of consumption and personal self-realisation.” New geopolitical situations also come into play here. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach enriched by case studies from diverse geographical environments is required to address the multifaceted nature of human migration and spatial mobility.

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