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# **Relocation or Recolonization: The Cultural Dynamics of Russian Migration to the South Caucasus**

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## **Abstract:**

**This article explores the complex phenomenon of Russian migration to the South Caucasus region following the Russian war in Ukraine. It analyzes the implications of this migratory wave on the cultural and social dynamics of the receiving countries, specifically Armenia and Georgia. By examining the historical and contemporary context, as well as the remembered narratives of the Russian migrants, the article sheds light on the emergence of a new cultural landscape and the challenges it presents. The analysis reveals the tensions between the migrants' anti-war stance and their simultaneous appropriation of space, creating an environment that exhibits signs of imperialism and cultural domination. The article concludes by discussing the limited resistance to said domination, and the urgent need for intellectual and activist engagement to address the colonial undertones embedded within the migratory process.**

In response to the question of what colonial past means in the context of cultural transformations, the President of PEN Armenia and contemporary writer Armen Ohanian stated, "I believe there is no need to prove that today we find ourselves in a crisis of identity, and one of the ways to overcome this crisis is through revisiting or reinterpreting the past. Unfortunately, this has not happened at the institutional level. Today we find ourselves in a reality where we can equate the democratization of Armenia with its decolonization. Unfortunately, we have not had a profound conversation about de-Sovietization, nor have we discussed Stalinism or other aspects of the past. And today, it is impossible to move forward

without rethinking the complex past.” Cultural researcher Hrach Bayadayan also responded to the same question: “When we talk about the colonial past, we primarily mean the Soviet past, although it should be noted that this is a debatable topic, as not everyone thinks so [...]. Studying this past in the context of colonialism is not an end in itself; rather, we want to understand the present day. It seems that we have independence, political independence, and it seems that it is time to say goodbye to this past, but whether we want it or not, it remains with us.”

These reflections of Armenian intellectuals are part of one of the winter schools held in Yerevan at the end of 2022. The lectures and discussions of experts are joined by those of their colleagues who, together with the young participants of the event, try to understand the influence of the Russian language on Armenian, Soviet architecture, and changes in urban spaces in the context of colonization, the literature of the GULAG, and others. Such debates and alternative educational platforms have come in demand over the past two years, as Russia's war against Ukraine has significantly changed the political and cultural situation in almost the entire world, revealing that a historical rupture has occurred and the colonial discourse poses a threat to the independence of almost all former Soviet republics. Armenia, like other countries in the South Caucasus, has also found itself involved in this context, partly due to the large influx of Russian migration and, on the other hand, realizing that the presence of Russian forces is not so much a guarantee of security as an expansion and coercion.

## **The Last Plane**

The situation in the entire South Caucasus region rapidly changed after the start of the Russian war in Ukraine. Millions of Ukrainians became refugees and were forced to leave their homes, trying to find refuge from Russian aggression, mainly in European countries. The war was provoked by Russia, and Russian authorities tried to justify their actions by faking history and facts, putting forward narratives that could only be regarded as imperial or colonial. With the outbreak of the war, a large number of Russians immediately migrated to the South Caucasus countries -- Kazakhstan, Turkey, Cyprus, and others. This flow of migration created a new situation, catching both Armenia and Georgia unprepared. According to various statistics, from 200 to 300 thousand Russians moved to Tbilisi and Yerevan, and this new reality could not remain without consequences for the cultural field; a few months later, we were already faced with fairly obvious transformations of the cultural environment. A number of issues and tensions arose because Armenia and Georgia were not prepared for migrants; moreover, Russians brought to the region a considerable degree of cultural and economic expansion. Armenia became one of those “open” countries for Russians, where following the change of the economic situation (a sharp increase in prices for real estate, services and food) also changed the cultural and social life.

In addition to the main sector of Russians, who are mostly freelance IT workers, come academics, artists, activists and media workers have abruptly moved to Armenia. It is important to notice that all these social groups left Russia to avoid the risks associated with their anti-war

position, therefore it seemed that this anti-war position should mean a more global understanding of the role of their country, their language and their activity as cultural actors. However, after moving to Armenia, the new migrants quickly created a narrative and self-narrative with which to identify the situation.

## **Nonrefugees**

Curiously, the Russians showed a reluctance to use conventional terms such as "migration," "refugee," or "forced displacement" when describing their own migration to the South Caucasus. This phenomenon could be partially understood by examining the viewpoints expressed by the liberal opposition, where it is possible to find an explanation for this, which led to the fact that in this difficult situation when millions of Ukrainians have become real refugees, it is inappropriate to equate themselves with them and therefore Russians do not define themselves as refugees. It seems that such a position is quite logical in this situation and it is also logical that migrants began to use the definition of "relocant" and "relocation", and today, not a single Russian in Armenia or Georgia defines himself a migrant but calls himself a relocant. Thus, in linguistic terms, the South Caucasus once again stopped being "another region" ; Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia stopped being understood as states (after all, any movement from one country to another was a migration or a tourist trip). Furthermore, along with a new identifying word, Russians have invented a new reality for their own presence: something between tourism and migration, where we are no longer countries, nor states, but just "locations" for them.

## **Close Memory**

The linguistic and geographical dimension seems to be only one side of the question. The articulation of oneself in the created situation is also the result of the work of memory - close and distant memory. Russians' close memory of Armenians and Georgians is the same memory about Caucasians in the post-Soviet period - memory about migrants. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the beginning of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the economic blockade, which Armenians named "dark years", began a big wave of migration to Russia. The Soviet image of Caucasians -- a little funny, a little illiterate, a little romantic -- dreamers coming down from the mountains, an image that is strengthened in Soviet cinema and literature, has been transformed into a racist perception of Caucasians as exclusively service personnel. The generation leaving Russia today due to economic sanctions and political repression is a generation that grew up in an environment where racism and all kinds of intolerance were normalized for several decades. Self-definition as "migrants" or "refugees" seems to be unacceptable to Russians in Armenia or Georgia, because in their memory migrants are us, but not them. They felt economic superiority in their country, and they continue to feel it today in Yerevan and Tbilisi. A close memory tells them that they cannot be migrants, since they came to the country of their "own migrants", so they are relocants. Therefore, even the

most liberal and decolonial-minded Russians from the start of their migration process began to discuss and criticize colonialism of their own country, but often these discussions were so concentrated around the internal problems of their country that the participants in such debates literally forgot where they were. Armenians were excluded from the discussion about colonialism, and accordingly, they were not recognized as colonized. Although, in order to see a colonized in someone, you need to realize his otherness, to recognize his space as different, which was difficult, considering the fact that Armenia received the status and role of a “location.”

## **New space**

There was only a little talk about colonialism. We must be honest and admit that a small part of the intelligentsia in exile with discussions about imperialism stayed in Yerevan for quite a short time. Soon they moved to Germany, Israel or the Baltic countries, and they were replaced by a new wave of migrants, now fleeing from mobilization. A new, younger community of Russians, without hesitations and discussions of the evil of their country, began the rapid appropriation of space. The narrative of imperialism quickly gave way to endless talk about this space - a new space. Young active relocants that were much wealthier than local people started endless searches for a new space: “We are looking for a new space,” and “we are opening a new space” were common sentiments. There was a feeling that Armenia is an old or uncomfortable space for them. Such spaces quickly emerged: bars, clubs, bookstores, alternative schools, and others. In fact, it was an attempt not to create a new one, but to simply transplant or transfer familiar infrastructure to a new location.

These new spaces quickly began to acquire rules of administration and regulation—firstly, it was a language rule (with migrants only speaking Russian, because local people would understand them anyway), and secondly an economic rule (the pricing policy would correspond to that of the migrants’ previous lives in Russia, which fit the new space which had been developed for Russians who had enough finances). But besides these rules of administration, it is very important what these new spaces were filled with. It is interesting to note that any reflection on what is happening in Russia, any attempts to talk about what is happening in Ukraine and with Ukrainians, and even talk about a bloody war between Armenia and Azerbaijan was out of the new space of relocants. Instead, more and more posters appeared on the streets of Yerevan announcing the best theatrical performances, concerts, and other events. An endless series of workshops and educational projects also appeared: the concept of enlightenment and emancipation, well known to Armenians from the 19th century and from the educational projects of the Soviet period, was replaced by neologisms such as “eco-enlightenment” and “digital education.”

What can be the perception of the local community when migrants endlessly announce “new spaces” and “the best of culture,” and when they announce enlightenment? It remains to realize that in this old and uncomfortable space, everything was not the best and that there is no light

here. The discussion about imperialism again remained only an introductory part or surface of the Russian imperial narrative.

## **The Distant Memory**

Speaking about the question of cultural memory, it is important to mention that we are talking not only about close memory but also about a more distant memory. It seems that Russians have never had a chance to develop a different attitude towards any “other” country, especially Armenia. The colonial discourse inherited by Soviet Russia from imperial Russia has never been rejected. The modern “openness” of Armenian culture to Russian culture is just the result of regular and continuous domination.

Stepping away from the current situation, I would like to recall a publication written by the English traveler and member of Parliament Lynch in the early years of the last century and translated into Russian in 1910. The book was translated and published with the subtitle “Russian Provinces.” The exoticization of Armenia by Lynch in this book becomes another linguistic layer, and this level of the language is the purest dictionary of cultural imperialism. The meaning of this translation, already in the preface itself, is explained only by an attempt to show “important peripheries of Russia.” It should be noted how different the narratives of Lynch (a representative of a liberal political party) and of the Russian translator and publisher are, as is clearly highlighted by the following passage:

“But if the areas inhabited by Armenians could cause this kind of interest to an Englishman, then how much necessary for the Russian reader to be familiar with them, just by the fact that most of this territory belongs to Russia. And at this moment, when Russian political thought particularly often turns to peripheral issues, coverage of one of them seems quite timely. Of course, the views expressed in this book are sharply influenced by the pure English perspective, but this does not reduce the interest of this work for the Russian reader.”

It seems that after a hundred years, the narrative of the Russian state about Armenia has not changed much; it has not changed for other neighboring countries either. The invasion of Ukraine, the occupation of a part of Georgia, and the manipulation of the Karabakh conflict, among others are striking examples. But how can we talk about the decolonial agenda of the Russian opposition when we see such an aggressive appropriation of the cultural environment in the South Caucasus? The regular violation of cultural rights and the exclusion of local residents from the cultural process through linguistic and economic domination make us question where the boundaries of Russian officials and exiled civil society are today.

## Is There a Resistance?

Turning to the present situation, it should be noted that Armenia was not ready for such a large wave of migrants at any level: neither migration policy, nor economically, nor infrastructurally, nor even in terms of intellectual confrontation. Unfortunately, only a few experts in Armenia are ready to seriously explore the Soviet past and the attitude of modern Russia as a colonial state. Among such experts are Hrach Bayadjan (who has been speaking on the topic of cultural imperialism for many years), Tamar Shirinyin (who as an academic researcher, together with the art collective Quiring Yerevan, has published articles on the colonization of Armenia), and some activists (eco-activists, political activists, feminists, etc.) who repeatedly take action against colonial policies towards Armenia. The activity of these experts and activists is extremely important, and considering the unfolding political situation, this importance is growing daily.

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