[Auf]Lösungen

Dekoloniale Begegnungen

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Relocation or Recolonisation?
The Cultural Dynamics of Russian Migration to the South Caucasus

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Abstract

This article examines the complex phenomenon of Russian migration to the South Caucasus region following the Russian war in Ukraine. It analyzes the implications of this migration wave for the cultural and social dynamics of the host countries, specifically Armenia and Georgia. By addressing the historical and contemporary context, as well as the memory narratives of 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 summarizing the minor resistance and points to the urgent need for intellectual and activist engagement to address the colonial overtones embedded in the migration process.

Responding to the question about the colonial past in the context of cultural transformations, Armen Ohanyan, contemporary writer and the president of PEN Armenia, said, "I think there is no need to prove that today we are experiencing an

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identity crisis, and one of the ways to overcome this crisis is to revisit or reinterpret the past. Unfortunately, this has not happened at the institutional level. Today we find ourselves in a reality where Armenia's democratization can be equated with its decolonization. Sadly, we did not have an in-depth conversation about de-Sovietization, nor did we discuss Stalinism or other aspects of the past. And today, it is impossible to move forward without rethinking the complex past." Cultural researcher Hrach Bayadyan also answers the same question: "When we talk about the colonial past, we primarily refer to the Soviet past, although it should be noted that this is a controversial 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 like it or not, it remains with us."[1]

These reflections by Armenian intellectuals were part of one of the winter schools held in Yerevan at the end of 2022. The expert lectures and panel sessions were followed by lively exchanges with the young participants, seeking to discuss such topics as the influence of the Russian language on Armenian, Soviet architecture, urban transformations, Gulag literature, etc. Such debates and alternative educational platforms have become in demand over the past two years, as Russia's aggression against Ukraine has significantly altered the political and cultural situation almost worldwide — a historical rupture that has reinforced the colonial discourse threatening 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 sudden influx of Russian migrants[2] and, on the other hand, having realized that the presence of Russian forces is not so much a guarantee of security as expansion and coercion.

It should be noted that the subject of decoloniality comes up quite often in contemporary Armenian culture. For Armenian cultural actors, this term has a variety of connotations and overtones. The decolonial agenda is multifaceted: from revolutionary movements

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[1]   It's worth mentioning that Hrach Bayadyan is one of the few Armenian researchers who has been examining issues of cultural identity and cultural representation in the context of postcolonial studies for many years. In his work, Bayadyan demonstrated how the rhetoric of Soviet power changes from Stalinism to late Soviet modernism, how contemporary post-independence Armenian culture reproduces the Soviet legacy, etc. More importantly, Bayadyan is involved in both academic and non-academic activities; he is a guest lecturer at the Institute for Contemporary Art (Armenia) and in various cultural non-governmental organizations (for more about Soviet and Russian Orientalism, Armenia's representation on the cultural map of the Soviet state as well as about cultural representations in Soviet Armenia, see: Bayadyan, H. (2007). "Soviet Armenian Identity and Cultural Representation," in Darieva, T. and Kaschuba W. (eds.). *Representations on the Margins of Europe: Politics and Identities in the Baltic and South Caucasian States.* Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 198-212). Bayadyan is one of the first thinkers in Armenian intellectual history to adopt a postcolonial approach equating it with the 'post-Soviet' one. In his writings on mass culture, urbanism and literature, Bayadyan emphasizes the need for a dialogue between the Soviet past and the present. In his view, it is on the trajectory of this dialogue that Armenian identity takes shape today.

[2]   For more information, see: International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in Armenia. (July 2023). *Assessment among citizens of Russian Federation, Ukraine and Belarus living in Armenia* — https://armenia.un.org/en/241551-assessment-among-citizens-russian-federation-ukraine-and-belarus-living-armenia

for independence to the liberation of corporeal discourse[3] from patriarchal patterns, from environmental activism to the complex relationship of diasporic cultures with Soviet and post-Soviet Armenian culture, etc. Moreover, Armenian traumatic cultural memory consists of several layers of coloniality: the Ottoman Empire and Genocide narratives, incorporation into the Russian Empire and Soviet experience and so on. All these narratives make it impossible to focus on a single aspect of decoloniality. The Armenian case necessitates addressing the complex past, as coloniality is a multilayer phenomenon, a site of intricate entanglements. At the same time, decoloniality has become a hot topic in Armenian cultural milieu and political discourse in recent years, especially following the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020[4], as well as the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The last plane

The situation in the entire South Caucasus region changed rapidly after the outbreak of the Russian war in Ukraine. Millions of Ukrainians became refugees and were forced to leave their homes, in an attempt to seek refuge from Russian aggression, mostly in European countries. The war was provoked by Russia and the Russian authorities tried to justify their actions by falsifying history and facts, putting forward narratives that could only be regarded as imperial or colonial. Since the beginning of the war, a large number of Russians have migrated to the South Caucasus countries, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Cyprus, etc. This migration flow created a new situation, to which none of the countries of the South Caucasus — neither Armenia nor Georgia — was prepared. According to different statistical data, 200-300 thousand Russians moved to Tbilisi and Yerevan. The new reality could not remain without consequences for the cultural sphere; in a few months we witnessed quite obvious transformations in the cultural environment. Many problems and tensions arose due to the fact that Armenia or Georgia were not ready to receive migrants. At the same time, Russians brought considerable cultural and economic expansion to the region. Armenia has become one of those 'open' countries to Russians, where following the economic shifts (sharp rise in prices for property, services and food), cultural and social life has changed as well.

Russians who have migrated to Armenia are mostly IT freelancers. However, there are also many scientists, artists, activists and media workers among migrants.

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[3] Taguhi Tororsyan's analysis of one of the major retrospective exhibitions of Armenian art in 2023 (curated by art historian Vigen Galstyan and entitled "The Guises of the Nude; Perceptions of Nudity in Armenian Graphic Arts) shows the complexity of applying the notion of decoloniality to Armenian art. See: Torosyan, T. (2023). "Exhibiting "Armenian" Nudity: A Decolonial Approach to Art History" — https://evnreport.com/et-cetera/exhibiting-armenian-nudity-a-decolonial-approach-to-art-history/.

[4] One statement by anti-war activists from Armenia, entitled "Against the War in Արցախ | Qarabağ," called for a halt to the bloodshed, recounting the history of the 'transfer' of Karabakh to the Azerbaijani SSR and the colonial policies of the current Azerbaijani government. See- https://medium.com/sev-bibar/against-war-in-արցախ-qarabağ-2baaecfbad5e

It is important to note that all these social groups left Russia to avoid the risks associated with their anti-war stance. The latter should obviously mean a more global understanding of the role of their country, their language and their activities as cultural actors. However, upon moving to Armenia, new migrants quickly created narratives and self-narratives to represent the situation.

Nonrefugees

Interestingly, when describing their own migration to the South Caucasus, the Russians showed reluctance to use conventional terms such as "migration", "refugee", or "forced displacement." This phenomenon could be partly understood by examining the viewpoint of the liberal opposition, which boils down to the fact that in this difficult situation when millions of Ukrainians have become real refugees, it is inappropriate to equate oneself with them, and therefore Russians do not define themselves as refugees. This position seems quite logical in this situation. It also seems reasonable for migrants to use the terms *relocant* and 'relocation.' Today, no Russian in Armenia or Georgia defines himself as a migrant but calls himself a *relocant*. Thus, in linguistic terms, the South Caucasus once again ceased to be "another region," Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia ceased to be states (after all, any move from one country to another was a migration or a tourist trip). Furthermore, along with the new word, Russians have invented a new reality of their own presence: something between tourism and migration, where we are no longer countries, or states, but simply "locations."

"Russian Bathhouse in Yerevan." One of the many posters advertising Russian migrants' initiatives on the streets of Yerevan in 2022.

The close memory

The linguistic and geographical dimension seems to be only one side of the issue. The articulation of oneself in a given situation is also the result of the workings of memory — close and distant. Russians' close memories of Armenians and Georgians are merged with their post-Soviet memories of Caucasians, thus constituting their remembrances of migrants. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the outbreak of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the economic blockade, which Armenians called the 'dark years,' a great wave of migration to Russia began. The Soviet image of Caucasians — a little bit funny, a little bit illiterate, a little bit romantic dreamers coming down from the mountains — an image reinforced in Soviet cinema and literature, has been transformed into a racist perception of Caucasians as exclusively service personnel. Those leaving Russia today due to economic sanctions and political repression are part of a generation that grew up in an environment where racism and all kinds of intolerance were the norm for several decades. Identifying themselves as 'migrants' or 'refugees' seems unacceptable to Russians in Armenia or Georgia, because in their memories, migrants are us, not them. They felt economic superiority in their country, and they continue to feel it today in Yerevan and Tbilisi. Their close memories tell them that they cannot be migrants, since they came to the country of their 'own migrants,' so they are *relocants*. Although from the beginning of the migration even the most liberal and decolonial-minded Russians began to discuss and criticize their country's colonial practices, most of these discussions were so focused on Russia's internal problems that the participants literally forgot where they were. Armenians were excluded from the discussion on colonialism, and thus were not recognized as colonized. To see someone as colonized, is to recognize their otherness, to recognize their space as different, which was not easy, considering Armenia's status as a 'location.'

New space

Very little was said about colonialism. To be fair, these few exiled intellectuals with their discourse on imperialism didn't stay in Yerevan for long. They soon moved to Germany, Israel or the Baltic countries; they were replaced by a new wave of migrants fleeing mobilization. This new community of younger Russians, unashamed and unconcerned about the evils of their country, began to rapidly appropriate space. The narratives of imperialism quickly gave way to endless talks about space — a new space. Young active *relocants* who were much wealthier than the locals began an endless search for new spaces: "We are looking for new spaces," "we are opening new spaces." One had the feeling that Armenia was an old or uncomfortable space for them. And such spaces quickly emerged: bars, clubs, bookstores, alternative schools, etc. In fact, it was an attempt to transplant or relocate the familiar infrastructure to a new location rather than create something new.

These new spaces quickly began to adhere to their own administrative rules and regulations — firstly, linguistic (migrants would use only Russian; the local population understood them anyway), and secondly, economic (pricing policies were in line with migrants' previous life in Russia; they created new spaces for Russians with enough money). Beyond these rules, however, it is equally important to know what these new spaces were filled with. Interestingly enough, any reflection on what is happening in Russia, any attempt to talk about what is happening in Ukraine and with Ukrainians, and even any discussion about the bloody war between Armenia and Azerbaijan were excluded from *relocants*' new space. Instead, the streets of Yerevan were filled with more and more posters announcing the best theatrical performances, concerts, etc. The succession of workshops and educational projects was also endless. The concepts of enlightenment and emancipation, familiar to Armenians from the 19th century and from the educational projects of the Soviet period, were replaced by the newfangled words 'eco-enlightenment,' 'digital education,' etc. Paradoxically, in a fairly short period of time Russian actors began to offer not only 'new spaces,' but also — as it seemed to them — 'new narratives,' including debates on decoloniality that became the subject of exhibitions, online and offline art projects, etc. The discourse on the need for decolonisation often took the form of 'enlightenment' projects aimed at 'ennobling' and 'emancipating' the Armenian cultural space. Thus, 'decoloniality' unexpectedly became part of a new enlightenment project called 'relocation.'

Towards the end of 2023, when Karabakh Armenians were forced to flee to Armenia after Azerbaijani's military aggression — a huge flow of refugees for a small country — while the war continued in Ukraine and the number of Ukrainian refugees was growing daily, a gallery in Yerevan was hosting an exhibition of Russian artists on the theme of 'exile' and the search for a new safe space. One of the panel discussions was dedicated to the subject of decoloniality. Armenian and Georgian participants spoke about Russian and Soviet colonial practices, including the risk of appropriation faced by contemporary South Caucasian culture. The project's official statement contained wording that seemed entirely consistent with the current zeitgeist: "The participants of our project are artists and cultural practitioners currently living in Armenia, Georgia, Germany, Poland, and various corners of the world. Through their critical art and activist initiatives, they speak their mind to resist wars, political repressions, neo-colonial and imperial ambitions of authoritarian states and dictatorships." However, during the panel discussions on Russia's colonial ambitions and the recolonisation of South Caucasian cultures, the curators of the exhibition refused to speak on the subject. The chief curator repeatedly insisted that any discourse on decoloniality is fraught with nationalism. In fact, this was the modified version of the message previously voiced by the Russian authorities, who have been continuing their military aggression against Ukraine for many months now, justifying their criminal acts with 'denazification.' Unfortunately, such art labs are a recurring phenomenon in countries that have become the hub for Russian cultural projects.

How do these migrants perceive the local community when they endlessly talk about 'new spaces' and 'better culture' in their enlightenment projects? We are left to

assume that all is not well in this old and uncomfortable space, and there is no light here. The discussion of imperialism has once again remained just an introductory part or surface of the Russian imperial narrative.

The Columbus effect

In addition to the 'new space' narrative, the mass migration of Russian culture to the South Caucasus was also accompanied by a narrative that can be succinctly defined as the narrative of the 'discoverer.' After February 2022, Russian migrants began to actively open new bars, clubs and galleries in Yerevan and Tbilisi. These mini and macro institutions were accompanied by the phrase "first": the first vegan cafe in Vanadzor, the first queer bar in Tbilisi, the first eco-movement in Armenia, etc. In reality, as in the case of 'new space,' the narrative of 'firstness' turned out to be false, as nothing new was created for local communities. This or that initiative seemed 'first' to migrants and was presented to the public in such a way because of a banal unwillingness to study the past of their new place of residence. It should be noted that the Columbus effect is also an attempt to erase cultural memory; if an initiative is deemed to be the first, then this place has no past, all its experience, everything that has been accumulated over the past decades, is nullified and devalued. Overall, seemingly innocent 'first' exhibitions of digital art or the 'first' queer pubs mark the erasure of the cultural memory of local communities.

The distant memory

In the context of cultural memory, in addition to close memories, one should refer to distant memories. It seemed that Russians never had the opportunity to develop a different attitude towards any "other" country, especially Armenia. The colonial discourse inherited by Soviet Russia from imperial Russia was never rejected. The current "openness" of Armenian culture to the Russian language is just the result of regular and continuous domination.

Diverting from the current situation, I would like to recall a publication written by the English traveler and Member of Parliament H. F. B. Lynch at the begining of the last century and translated into Russian in 1910. The book was published with the subtitle "The Russian Provinces." Lynch's exoticization of Armenia in this book becomes another linguistic layer; this level of the language is the purest dictionary of cultural imperialism. The meaning of this translation is already explained in the preface itself as merely an attempt to show "important peripheries of Russia." The following passage clearly demonstrates the difference between the narrative of Lynch, a Liberal MP, and that of the Russian translator and publisher.

> *"But if the territories inhabited by Armenians could arouse such interest in an Englishman, then how necessary it is for the Russian reader to be familiar with them by the virtue of the fact that most of these territories belong to Russia. And at this point in time, when Russian political thought particularly often turns to peripheral issues, the coverage of one of them seems very timely. Of course, the opinions expressed in this book are strongly influenced by a purely English point of view, but this does not diminish the interest of this work for the Russian reader."[5]*

It seems that the narrative of the Russian state with regard to Armenia has not changed much in a hundred years, nor has it changed with regard to other neighboring countries — the invasion of Ukraine, the occupation of Georgian territories, the manipulation of the Karabakh conflict, etc. But how can we possibly talk about the decolonial agenda of the Russian opposition when we see such aggressive appropriation of the cultural environment in the South Caucasus? The regular violation of cultural rights and the exclusion of the locals from the cultural process through linguistic and economic domination raises the question of where the boundaries between Russian officials and civil society in exile lie.

Is there a resistance?

Returning to the current situation, it should be noted that Armenia was not prepared for such a large wave of migrants at any level: neither in terms of migration or economic policy, nor in terms of infrastructure and intellectual confrontation. Unfortunately, only a handful of experts in Armenia are willing to seriously examine the Soviet past as colonial or view modern Russia as a colonial state. Among such experts is Hrach Bayadyan, who has been addressing the topic of cultural imperialism for many years. Russia's cultural invasion of the South Caucasus, particularly Armenia, has also made the cultural and educational imperialism, developed throughout the post-Soviet period, more visible. All discussions related to the Soviet past, such as the culture and political repression of the Soviet regime, the Soviet exploitation of natural resources, the inter-ethnic conflicts and coloniality, have always been the privilege of Moscow. After the collapse of the Soviet state, knowledge as such, including our understanding of postcoloniality migrated to Moscow and was appropriated by the former center. This is the reason why, by the time the war in Ukraine began, none of the former Soviet republics were ready for Russian cultural intervention, including on the level of knowledge.

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[5] Линч Г. Ф. Б. (1910). *Армения: Путевые очерки и этюды* / Пер. с англ. Е. Джунковской: в 2 т. , том 1. С. 1-2 [Lynch, G.F. B. (1910). *Armenia: Travels and Studies. Volume 1: The Russian Provinces* / Transl. from English E. Dzhunkovsky: in 2 volumes. Vol 1. Pp. 1-2]