The Armenian diaspora and repatriates: a story of genocide, conflict and influence

A case study of the perceived influence of the Armenian diaspora and repatriates on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

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Abstract

Armenia has a complicated history and a present. Important factors that have shaped its history during the twentieth century are the Armenian genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire (1915-17), the occupation by and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, and the (armed) conflict with Azerbaijan about the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia's development is further hindered and complicated because of its isolated position in the Caucasus, with several closed borders. The descendants of the genocide survivors are spread out across the world in the diaspora. The diaspora in the United States has a strong lobby for Armenia and its interests. This thesis focuses on the perceived influence of this diaspora, with a special interest in the conflict with Armenia's neighbor, Azerbaijan.

At first sight, the diaspora lobby seems to be successful, as witnessed by the recognition of the genocide by several countries. The question is, however, to what extent this influence does reach Armenia and how it is perceived by its citizens. For this research, recently returned repatriates have been interviewed about their opinions and ideas on the diaspora lobby and influence, what the diaspora has done for Armenia and whether or not they notice any effects of this on the development of the country and its ongoing conflict with Azerbaijan. The main question is whether the perceived influence of the diaspora is a helpful hand in the social and economic development of Armenia and perhaps a solution for the conflict with Azerbaijan, or whether, quite contrary, it is harmful and helps in keeping the corruption and Soviet mentality of the country in place.

Keywords: Armenia, Azerbaijan, repatriates, diaspora, influence, Nagorno-Karabakh, United States, conflict, identity, economy

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Introduction

Armenia and Azerbaijan share a significant part of their history. Currently they are embroiled in a (violent) conflict about the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. This region is officially part of Azerbaijan, however Armenia has taken over control during the 1988-1994 Nagorno-Karabakh war. The majority of its population, mostly of Armenian descent, wanted to separate from Azerbaijan and become independent. The conflict is still unresolved, but frozen. The so-called Minsk Group, comprising more than ten countries, such as Russia, the United States, Turkey as well as several European countries, aims to resolve the territorial dispute between the two countries. Since 1992, at various summit meetings with Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Minsk Group has tried to stabilize the conflict and negotiate a peace deal. As a consequence of the conflict, Armenia has become isolated in the Caucasus, with diplomatic ties cut with both Azerbaijan and Turkey. Armenia is supported by Russia, with Iran being another regional trading partner. Iran, however, in turn is isolated itself because of international sanctions installed at the insistence of the United States (Rome, 2019).

A key element in Armenian history and contemporary society is formed by the diaspora and the repatriates. The Armenian diaspora is spread out across the world, large groups of which are located in various countries such as the United States, Russia, France and Syria. The number of Armenians living outside of Armenia is actually larger than the current population of the country itself; about eight million Armenians living abroad as compared to just three million Armenians living in Armenia (Martirosyan, 2014, p. 57). Armenian repatriates are those members of the diaspora who have decided to move back to 'their' ancestral country. Although no specific numbers of repatriates are recorded, the number has steadily increased during recent years (Graham, 2018).

Definition of the term '(Armenian) diaspora'

To start with, it is important to define several key notions that are used throughout this thesis. The first central notion is the term 'diaspora'. In general, diaspora refers to "a group of people who spread from one original country to other countries." (Cambridge English Dictionary, n.d.)

In the case of the Armenia diaspora, various specific groups can be identified. Hovhanesian (2008) distinguishes five different (waves of) groups:

- Armenians that have left the Ottoman Empire before 1915;

- Armenians that from 1915 on have left their country in response to the genocide by the Ottoman army;

- Armenians who left their country during the Soviet era (1920-1990) and moved to other regions of the Soviet Union;

- Armenians who left their country during the Soviet era and moved to other parts of the world; and

- Armenians who left their country after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in response to the economic problems resulting from the country's independence and the war with Azerbaijan. (Hovhanesian, 2008, p. 8)

Based on the above, the term '(Armenian) diaspora' can be interpreted in various, broad, ways. The *Cambridge Dictionary* definition does not offer a clear definition or explanation as to why a diaspora becomes a diaspora as such. The description of the Armenian diaspora is also broadly interpreted, with various ways and waves of migration and diverse reasons for leaving. This research primarily focuses on the second wave of Armenian migrants, with special reference to the descendants of the genocide survivors who have recently returned or plan to return to Armenia.

It is important to note right away that there is a substantial difference between the various diaspora groups, depending on the nationality, location and/or country where they have settled. Although there are large diaspora communities inside Russia (the third wave of Armenian diaspora), this research centers around the groups living in or originating from Western countries such as France and the United States, and in particular on the question why these, often well-educated, Westerners chose to return to Armenia. To illustrate: countries with large groups of Armenians are the United States with between 500,000 and 1.5 million Armenians, France with 500,000 Armenians and Russia with 2.5 million Armenians (Kiprop, 2018; Cross, 2012, par. 5).

To follow-up on Hovhanesian' division, the first important and numerous Armenian diaspora wave (the second category) was a direct result of the genocide of the Armenian population by the Ottoman Empire during World War I. The survivors of this genocide fled the region and settled across the world. Although the descendants of these Armenians do not have a direct link to Armenia as they have never lived there, they do, however, feel a strong (emotional) connection to their ancestral country (Laycock, 2012, p. 103). In several countries, primarily the United

States, this diaspora has a strong lobby that tries to improve Armenia's image and its geopolitical position. Major topics that are a part of the Armenian lobby activities are efforts to get funding from the international aid and development program of USAID, as well as trying to establish better relations with neighboring countries. At the same time, lobby groups in Russia are also actively involved in securing Russian military aid and equipment for Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (Smith & Stares, 2007, p. 120). The Armenian authorities play into this by giving the diaspora a voice in government affairs, by, for example, creating a separate Ministry of Diaspora (Ministry of Diaspora of the Republic of Armenia, n.d).

This thesis will look further into the role and position of Armenian diaspora members – both inside and outside of Armenia – and into their perceptions of the conflict with Azerbaijan, including a potential solution to this conflict. The research is partly based on interviews, held on location in the Armenian capital of Yerevan, with repatriates; foreign-born Armenians who have chosen to return to Armenia in order to start a new life. Interviewing repatriates was chosen because they are in a unique position; originating and growing up in the diaspora, a foreign context, but nowadays living in Armenia and experiencing local culture and society. This makes the repatriates a specific and ideal group of (former) diaspora members to conduct interviews with, as they experience Armenia from close by, actually living there, instead of from a distance, like in the diaspora.

The main research question of this thesis is: *How and to what extent have repatriates and diaspora members an influence in Armenia and how does this affect the war efforts and a possible peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan?*

Figure 1: Map of the Caucasus region

Source: (Tidwell et al, 2001, p. 19)

Societal Relevance

The Caucasus region comprises a small, albeit important part of the world. Caucasus countries struggle with relevant and very diverse issues. For instance, Georgia has been involved in a brief war with Russia, fought over potential independence of the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Azerbaijan in turn, since its independence has expanded its oil exports from the Caspian Sea, achieving significant economic benefits (Marsden, 2018), although not everybody has profited in the same degree from this oil boom (Altstadt, 2017). At the same time, Azerbaijan also has to deal with a grave refugees' crisis, caused by the displacement of thousands of people due to the conflict about Nagorno-Karabakh (United Nations Azerbaijan, n.d.). Armenia is economically isolated because of the closed borders with both Azerbaijan and Turkey. Because of the ongoing dispute on the Armenian genocide at the beginning of the 20th century, Turkey and Armenia still have no diplomatic ties. On the other hand, Turkey does have close bonds with Azerbaijan; just as neighboring Georgia, Turkey is part of the oil transport link from the Caspian Sea towards Europe. Given this context, the region is a (potential) conflict zone. This situation becomes even more complex and aggravated, as both Russia and the United States have, or at least try to gain, a certain degree of influence in the region (De Waal, 2018).

In the recent past, the Caucasus has been confronted with a direct war over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Although active fighting has not taken place since 2016, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has not been resolved – in that sense the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains frozen. The conflict does show occasional flare-ups of violence and has certainly resulted in tensions between the major actors involved.

An important, socially relevant element is the role of the diaspora in the region – the specific focus of this research. Members of diaspora groups have, although not having lived in Armenia for decades, mostly kept their heritage and are often involved in active communities, supporting Armenia with financial aid and/or volunteer work. It is arguably relevant to know the extent of this influence and the effect it has on Armenia. At the same time, it is interesting to look into the notion of 'identity' in this respect; what links a (former) diaspora member, even one hundred years later, with his or her ancestral homeland (Birthright Armenia, n.d.).

The various conflicts and interests of specific actors in the region are relevant, although there is a clear lack of specific information and insight regarding the influence of relevant actors, also on a personal level. Potential differences between the various diaspora generations, groups and nationalities are also relevant, so as to better understand the motives of each group for whether or not to be involved in Armenia and its politics. Research regarding this region and issue might help in preserving the identity of the Armenian diaspora as well as solving past and current issues that still plague the region, such as the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Scientific Relevance

In terms of scientific relevance, this thesis tries to fill some gaps in the knowledge and insight regarding the influence of the diaspora, as well as repatriates, on the Armenian government and the decisions it makes in Armenia. Specific examples of this are the position of the Ministry of Diaspora and the role of repatriates and the influence they might have. The number of repatriates has steadily increased, with a peak in 2018 following the so-called Velvet Revolution, a bloodless change in government in Armenia (Hauer, 2019, par. 7). From an academic point of view, it is relevant to see what the positive and/or negative influence of repatriates is – in this case the new citizens in Armenia, who, although of Armenian heritage, are significantly different in

the ways they were brought-up in a different country with a different identity, a different social environment and different way of life.

This research contributes to the scientific relevance by looking into the hypothesized influence of the diaspora and repatriates through the eyes of the latter in a practically applied way. Based on the interviews, the influence on a grass-roots level can be determined, allowing for a small-scale scope in addition to notions derived from the existing literature. Furthermore, although a lot of research has been done on the role of the diaspora, not much attention has been paid to the (potential) role of repatriates in general, and certainly not specifically in relation to Armenia. By interviewing repatriates, this research aims to fill in some voids in the research about the Armenian diaspora and the repatriates, laying the groundwork for future research on potential influence and how it might have changed over the years.

Research Design

To better understand the role of (former) diaspora members in Armenia and how they might influence the war efforts and a potential peace process, the goal was to interview some twenty people, descending from the diaspora community, that have moved to Armenia (semi-)permanently. This was done in order to include more perspectives from people with different backgrounds and histories.

The interviews were conducted in the capital of Yerevan, giving interviewees the possibility to talk about their experiences while living in the city. Interviews were conducted based upon previously formulated questions. However, the interviews were semi-structured, which allowed for questions to be answered as well as new elements included during the interviews. The interviews were recorded by audio recorder on a mobile phone, in addition to notes taken on paper. The expected length of the interviews was a maximum of one hour; the setting was relaxed so as to maintain the semi-structured nature of the interview.

The first analysis of the interviews was done on location in Yerevan as soon as the interviews had taken place, in order to clarify possible questions that arose after the interviews. The interviews were first transcribed through OTranscribe.com. For the final analysis, the Atlas-Ti program was used.

For this research eighteen interviews were conducted with repatriates from Armenian descent, who currently live in Armenia. The interviewees had various backgrounds, originating for instance from the United States, Lebanon and Syria.

Although eighteen interviews have been conducted, only seventeen are included in the analysis. This is because of the conditions under which interview #17 was conducted. Interview #17 was held using Facebook messenger; the interviewee sent the answers to my questions in audio format. This particular format and a lack of availability of the interviewee made that it was not possible to properly interview her. Therefore, it was decided not to include these audio files and exclude them from the research. Although interview #17 has not been included, interview #18 is still referred to as such, because it was conducted in that order.

Of the seventeen interviews, nine were conducted with women and eight with men. An equal ratio of males and females was envisaged, so as to maintain the neutrality and equality of this research. The analysis of the interviews is reported anonymously, with names and contact information removed during transcribing. Interviewees were asked eleven questions, starting with introductory questions about their heritage and historical background. The questions further focused on the reasons for moving, the adjustment to life in Armenia, differences and/or similarities with their country of origin, political involvement and opinions about politics in Armenia and the Armenian government, as well as the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Lastly, the repatriates were asked how they perceive the influence of the diaspora and themselves, and how this might affect the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, either positive or negative. Based on the answers to these questions, a picture can be given of how involved repatriates are in Armenia, what their opinions about the current government and the diaspora are, and what the future holds as far as the conflict with Azerbaijan is concerned. A complete list of the questions asked during the interviews is added in the Appendix to this thesis.

Additionally, the research includes an extensive literature research concerning Armenian policies and politics, and the treatment of the diaspora and repatriates. The literature research and interviews will answer the research question separately in Chapter 3. The interviewees are quoted regularly, in order to illustrate their opinions. Please note that the quotes taken from the interviews have been slightly edited, so as to remove some colloquial words and catchphrases.

In order to answer the research question, this thesis has the following outline: to begin with, an extensive theoretical framework concerning this topic is included in Chapter 1. Next, the context, including the complex history of Armenia, is addressed in

Chapter 2. Chapter 3 includes the analysis of the interviews and the results regarding the research question. The final discussion and conclusion of this research are included in Chapter 4. Finally, a bibliography and some appendixes with further information and source material are added.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

To be able to answer the central research question, various notions and key issues relevant to the conflict context have to be identified, defined or described. It is also necessary to clarify the links and interrelationships between these various notions and key issues. This will be done, primarily based on a literature review. Firstly, the international dimensions regarding the notion of diaspora will be discussed. Secondly, the relevant literature on Armenia will be addressed. Lastly, the literature regarding the influence of the diaspora in Armenia will be dealt with.

1.1 Differences between the diaspora and local Armenians far and near the conflict

Before establishing the influence of the diaspora in Armenia through interviews, it is important to address the differences between the diaspora and local Armenians. The Armenian genocide is most likely the major factor creating a divide between the two groups; the feeling among diaspora members is obviously that the genocide is the prime reason for them living outside of Armenia (Papazian, 2019, p. 55). In this respect Papazian notes that there is a risk of the diaspora being classified as the 'eternal victim', a group with a constant need for recognition (Papazian, 2019, p. 55). Sticking to such a classification will negatively influence the development of a new, post-Soviet Armenia but also the future development of the diaspora itself (Papazian, 2019, p. 55). The continuous call by the diaspora for the complete recognition of the genocide by all countries – and in particular for Turkey to end its denial of this historic event – creates a divide between Armenia and its neighbors and is therefore a cause for further isolation. Furthermore, the integration of the diaspora into their respective countries is not made any easier by this constantly voiced need for recognition (Papazian, 2019, p. 80).

Björklund has analyzed the position of the Armenian diaspora and specifically the question to what extent diaspora members have the right to speak for the whole of Armenia and its statehood (Björklund, 1993, p. 338). Björklund points out that the issue is further complicated because of the position of so-called Western Armenia, nowadays a part of Turkey. In focusing on the post-Soviet period, Björklund describes how a new wave of descendants of genocide survivors migrated after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the negative impact this has had on Armenia (Björklund, 1993,

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p. 357). Tensions between the two groups are primarily based on the behavior of the 'post-Soviet Armenians' on the one hand and the rest of the Armenians worldwide on the other (Björklund, 1993, p. 357). A distinction is made between Eastern Armenia (present-day Armenia) and Western Armenia (historically a part of Turkey), where the former managed to escape the genocide, only to disappear into the Soviet Union. This obviously resulted in differences as far as historical background and culture are concerned, whereas both history and culture are deciding factors in the identity, behavior and mentality of the various Armenian groups (Björklund, 1993, p. 357).

Björklund as well as Papazian focus on the negative dimensions of the relationship between diaspora members and local Armenians. Papazian does so by strongly highlighting the need for recognition of all wrongdoings among the diaspora, which in effect isolates Armenia from its neighbors, in particular from Turkey and Azerbaijan. Both Papazian and Björklund point out that in some cases the diaspora tends to speak for Armenia as a whole, although a clear distinction should be made between the two groups, based on historical and cultural differences.

The perceptions and opinions of locals or other people who have first-hand experienced the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, centering on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, is important so as to better understand the complexities of the conflict. Based on previous research, some conclusions can be drawn. First, there obviously is a significant difference in the perceptions and opinions of interviewees from the various countries in and around the conflict region (Sotieva et al., 2019, p. 8), for instance major differences regarding feelings of patriotism and national pride (Sotieva et al., 2019, p. 9). At the same time, the conflict (be it inadvertently or not) shapes the identities of all the people involved (Sotieva et al., 2019, p. 6). This becomes clear when people are asked about their plans for the future; with the conflict in mind, locals tend to find it difficult to plan their future (Sotieva et al., 2019, p. 6).

Another interesting element in this respect is the role of third parties in the conflict. According to Sotieva et al., people in general feel that third parties, including foreign actors such as the United States and Russia or the Minsk Group, should try to solve the conflict (Sotieva et al., 2019, p. 10); they have less confidence in the directly involved countries and their abilities to solve the conflict (Sotieva et al., 2019, p. 10). The respondents feel that outside actors carry 'strength', given their political and financial power. In addition to these outside state actors, also groups like NGOs, other

third parties and the diaspora are named in this respect (Sotieva et al., 2019, p. 11). On the other hand, local respondents do not have much confidence that these third-party actors are actually able to solve the conflict (Sotieva et al., 2019, p. 10). In other words, in this conflict there is a clear difference between perceptions and reality when looking at the local opinions. Locals tend to link the diaspora and NGOs to strength, power and money; but these perceptions are not confirmed by real facts, according to Sotieva et al. (Sotieva et al., 2019, p. 11).

1.1.1 The issue of identity

One of the major elements that needs to be addressed is the issue of identity and various sub-questions linked to this: how do repatriates feel about identity, what are the reasons for their strong connection to Armenia? This connection can only be based on historical narratives, because the younger repatriates were neither born during Soviet times nor have they lived in Armenia.

Former President Serzh Sargsyan (2008-18) talked extensively about 'the new Armenian' and what it entails (Tuncel, 2015, p. 117). Initially he talked about the need for a new identity, "person-centered, freedom-centered, and rights-centered" (Tuncel, 2015, p. 118). According to Sargsyan, loyalty to Armenia and the Armenians was a very important element of 'the new Armenian' (Tuncel, 2015, p. 118). However, from 2010 on he stressed the importance of political and civic dimensions as being part of the Armenian identity (Tuncel, 2015, p. 199). A major reason for this sudden shift in tone was the political instability as well as the increased tensions between Armenia, Turkey and Azerbaijan. By directly linking the conflict to the notion of shared responsibilities, Sargsyan also created an efficient way to keep the various diaspora communities actively involved in Armenian businesses, stressing the need to conform to one, shared, identity (Tuncel, 2015, p. 123).

A second dimension linked to identity is the notion of 'home'. Repatriates that move to Armenia feel that they have come home. Tuncel illustrates the Armenian context of 'home' with four examples: a land of advantages, a land of Armenian-ness, a symbol of ethno-national rebirth, and a symbol of collective victory and hope (Tuncel, 2015, pp. 181-182). The concept of ethno-national rebirth is directly linked to the notion of 'home' and the best way to achieve this rebirth is through Armenia itself, according to Tuncel. Linking Armenia and Armenian-ness to each other, even if they are not identical, gives a profit to Armenia and its government (Tuncel, 2015, p. 186). The

creation of this Armenian identity does have a positive as well as negative side. During recent years this idea of 'Armenian-ness' has been built on genocide narratives, collective rituals and symbolic actions. Although important, these elements are no longer sufficient to build a strong identity and nationality for the diaspora, according to Tuncel (Tuncel, 2015, p. 190).

1.2 Relations between the diaspora and Armenia

In light of the above, it should come as no big surprise that the relations between the diaspora communities and Armenia are sometimes (very) complicated. Differences in cultural and historical narratives make cooperation difficult. The many decades of Soviet rule – or 'occupation by the Soviet Union' – have left a significant mark on Armenians. The idea of the state taking care of people while they work for the state, is not directly compatible with the notion of a free market economy and Western-style democracy. This incompatibility might cause frictions between native Armenians on the one hand and diaspora members and/or repatriates on the other.

For this reason, the Armenian government is struggling with the link between the diaspora, the repatriates and local Armenians. Relations between the diaspora and the Armenian government have been full of temperament, making it impossible to build a good relationship, according to Cavoukian (Cavoukian, 2016, p. 14). For years, the Armenian government has tried to shape one identity for the entire diaspora community, an identity everybody had to conform to. By introducing the Ministry of Diaspora in 2008, the government thought it had found a new way to exert control over the diaspora. Its purpose was to have the Armenian state benefit, without causing any upheaval among the diaspora (Cavoukian, 2016, p. 265). Financial motives, although important, were not the major reason for setting up the Armenian Ministry of Diaspora. Instead, as Cavoukian states in her conclusion: "the primary motivation was curbing 'noisy' dissent and criticism, and fostering the emergence of hierarchical, geographically based organizations led by 'our kind of people'." (Cavoukian, 2016, p. 265). However, although the Ministry was clearly created to control the diaspora communities, for a long time Armenia had nothing to offer to lure the diaspora members back to its ancestral country (Cavoukian, 2016, p. 16).

In addition to this distinction between the Armenian state and the diaspora communities in general, there are obviously also differences among the diaspora itself. For instance, the diaspora communities in the United States have lived a more

secure life than the diaspora in, for example, Syria or other countries in the Middle East. Della Gatta has analyzed the position of the Armenian diaspora community in Syria and how it struggles with issues of identity and loyalty. According to her, in the Syrian conflict context diaspora members feel more forced to choose a side in the conflict; as a consequence, they lose part of their heritage and eventually have to give up one of their identities – either the identity of the home country or that of the host country (Della Gatta, 2019, p. 342). Feelings about their 'imagined homeland' are complex, as this homeland might not exist at all, given the territorial disputes or changing borders (Della Gatta, 2019, p. 340). Especially the Armenian diaspora is an example of a diaspora community that has been negatively affected by conflict (Della Gatta, 2019, p. 356).

Laycock (2012) has done research on repatriates returning to their homeland of Armenia right after World War II. The illusions among the diaspora did in no way conform to actual life in the Soviet Union; historical narratives did not resemble contemporary realities (Laycock, 2012, p. 103). A part of this new reality was already formed at the end of World War I: the creation of the republic of Turkey, resulting in the closing-off of (Turkish) Western Armenia from the Soviet republic of Armenia, ultimately symbolized by the loss of Mount Ararat (Laycock, 2012, pp. 103-104). The homecoming of diaspora members after World War II was further complicated by the changing political environment, i.e. Soviet occupation (Laycock, 2012, p. 105).

In conclusion, it is important to note that all of the aforementioned research not only points at the differences between the diaspora communities on the one hand and native Armenians on the other, but also that opinions and perceptions among the various diaspora communities as such (strongly) differ. In the words of Laycock: "During the repatriation campaign, Armenian images of 'homeland' diversified and fractured, rendering 'homeland' as much a divisive as a unifying factor in diasporic life." (Laycock, 2012, p. 117)

1.2.1 Volunteer Work

An element that should not be ignored in the context of relations between the diaspora communities and Armenia is the issue of volunteer work. Many repatriates experience Armenia for the first time during volunteer work (Tuncel, 2015). A relevant example of such a volunteer organization is Birthright Armenia. Branches of this organization

help Armenians all over the world in feeling more connected with their ancestral country through travel and volunteer work (Tuncel, 2015, p. 129). Youngsters who travel with Birthright Armenia learn the Armenian language during their trips, leading to a better bonding with locals. In addition to reuniting diaspora members with Armenia, Birthright Armenia also supports Armenia financially and assists in its development (Tuncel, 2015, p. 134). Tuncel is critical of this organization and its financial donations, however; the diaspora communities consist of highly-educated people who help "in the indoctrination of the 'Armenian homeland youth' as patriots of the progress of Armenia..." (Tuncel, 2015, p. 134). In conclusion: through their volunteer work and visits diaspora members are given a sense of 'Armenian-ness', while Armenia receives financial support and development, but also a fair share of indoctrination (Tuncel, 2015, p. 134).

1.3 The role of diaspora communities

For several years now, there has been a debate on the possible influence of the diaspora communities on Armenia and its conflict with Azerbaijan. In light of this research, it is relevant to look at other case studies concerning the role of diaspora communities in other conflict areas.

1.3.1 A comparison with other diaspora communities in a conflict situation

The focus of this research is the influence of the Armenian diaspora in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. There are various other case studies dealing with the influence of diaspora communities in conflict situations, for instance the Jewish diaspora and its influence and lobby activities in the United States. Looking at Israel, two main questions are: what is the influence of the diaspora community on the Israel/Palestine conflict and the peace process, and is this diaspora involvement helpful in conflict resolution?

Finding clear similarities between the Jewish and the Armenian diaspora is not easy. Shain (2002) does compare the two diasporas, presenting them as examples of diaspora communities whose influence is difficult to ignore by local politicians, even if it were against their better judgment (Shain, 2002, p. 102). The question is, however, whether the Armenian diaspora is as involved in conflict resolution as the Jewish diaspora seems to be. Only this one case study by Shain brings up the Armenian diaspora and its relations with the government. Shain argues that

governments might harm their position if they were to ignore the diaspora communities and their identity and interests (Shain, 2002, p. 101). The question remains whether the Armenian government will allow more active participation of the diaspora, like Israel has done. Interviews with repatriates might shed more light on this issue.

Regardless of the answer, it is questionable how useful this involvement is, as other case studies argue. According to Koff (2016), research on diaspora aid has only begun during recent years, with the advance of new actors, new trends in philanthropy, and enhanced diaspora engagement (Koff, 2016, p. 6). Although this has allowed for further studies in diaspora research, the issue of how aid is given by the diaspora, including aid in a conflict context, is still unclear (Koff, 2016, p. 7). Koff argues that aid given by diaspora communities in a conflict context might very well undermine a peace process, because of different political agendas that might lead to confusion and division. Smith and Stares bring up the example of lobby groups that are involved in securing Russian military aid and equipment for Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (Smith & Stares, 2007, p. 120). This specific form of aid and assistance can be considered to be harmful, given the obvious and clear intention of prolonging the conflict.

Although Koff notices clear developments in diaspora studies, Koinova does not. The diaspora communities are very splintered, either as autonomous groups or as an extension of the homeland (Koinova, 2012, p. 99). According to her, in particular this latter group is ignored by Koff; this group does, however, have a great relevance for this research, as some of the interviewed repatriates belong to this category. Koinova argues that diaspora studies are not yet developed enough to make strong claims, as research is primarily based on the false idea that the diaspora is one entity. She does acknowledge, however, that dividing the diaspora into smaller groups for research purposes is difficult.

According to Koinova, the lack of organization of the various groups among the Armenian diaspora is comparable to the Kosovo diaspora movement in the 1990s. She points at the chaos: people campaigning for peace at the same time as others are preferring an armed revolt. It took until 1999 before the various Kosovar diaspora groups merged their ideas into one movement (Koinova, 2012, p. 101). Just like the Kosovar diaspora, within the Armenian diaspora different and clashing opinions about

the future of Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict exist, making a merger
unlikely.

1.3.2 The diaspora involvement in Armenia

An interesting issue is how much attention, also compared to other cases, the
Armenian government gives to 'its' diaspora. According to Shain (2002),
governments might harm their position if they were to the diaspora and its identity
and interests (Shain, 2002, p. 101). In this respect, Shain specifically names the
Armenian diaspora as an example of an influential diaspora group. It seems that the
Armenian government and the diaspora communities pay a lot of attention to each
other, as argued by both Atabekyan and Zarifian. Atabekyan specifically points at the
active involvement of the Armenian diaspora through donations and "full-scale
investors" (Atabekyan, 2008). Zarifian, however, is more skeptical of its successes,
especially about the influence of the Armenian diaspora in the United States. He
concludes that, although the Armenian lobby has been relatively successful in
genocide acknowledgment by other countries, it has failed to expand its influence into
other areas, such as the economy. Because of the war with Azerbaijan, Armenia has
been excluded from major economic projects in the Caucasus region; despite the
American-Armenian lobby (Zarifian, p. 10). Atabekyan apparently has chosen to
ignore this and paints a positive picture of Armenia as a developing state in which the
Armenian government and the diaspora equally need each other. In other words,
where Atabekyan notices a feeling of mutual needs and a shared community, Zarifian
highlights the divisions within the American-Armenian lobby in the United States as
well as between the diaspora community abroad and Armenia. An example of the
division among the diaspora community is the Armenian National Committee of
America (ANCA) versus the lesser-known Armenian Assembly of America (AAA),
both being lobby groups with very different goals (Zarifian, 2014, p. 506).

Another example of the divide between the diaspora community and Armenia is
mentioned by Giragosian. He points out that, although the emotional bond between
the diaspora community and Armenia runs deep, among the diaspora is a perception
that the Armenian government is only interested in their (financial) aid, while keeping
them at distance in domestic affairs (Giragosian, 2017, par. 5). Whereas Giragosian
highlights the diasporas' negative perceptions, Ferri looks at the link between the
diaspora and the Armenians from another perspective. He refers to a mutual feeling of

national pride and a shared history, linking the diaspora community and the Armenians – despite the major differences that have developed as a consequence of the years under Soviet rule (Ferri, 2015, p. 277).

Zarifian and Giragosian both question the effectiveness of the lobby and the diaspora's involvement, unlike Atabekyan who praises it. The question therefore still remains whether the Armenian lobby is positive for Armenia or whether it rather has negative effects on its development.

1.3.3 The diaspora's involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

An important and relevant topic is whether the diaspora community has any influence, be it positive or negative, on (a solution to) the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. While the existing literature stresses that diaspora communities are primarily focused on giving practical aid and helping with the development of infrastructure projects, Zarifian also pays attention to those diaspora lobbies that try to influence the US government regarding its position towards Azerbaijan, aid for Nagorno-Karabakh and the refugee crisis resulting from the war. In the process, these lobby groups are trying to block Azerbaijan from getting any influence in or gaining any financial benefits from the United States (Zarifian, 2014, p. 509). This all takes place in a complex context, given Azerbaijan's position as one of the major oil suppliers in the world (Zarifian, 2014, p. 509). Once more, Zarifian is skeptical about the diaspora's involvement, arguing it is marginal at best.

According to Souleimanov, the constant influence of the diaspora leads to, in combination with the close collaboration between Turkey and Azerbaijan, to all kinds of conspiracy theories that do harm the peace process. This includes, for instance, the theory prevalent in both Armenia and Azerbaijan that there is some kind of global conspiracy directed against their own people (Souleimanov, 2013, p. 104). Souleimanov also brings up the more general issue of support given by the diaspora – a heavily debated topic as such. Souleimanov relates how during the final days of the Soviet Union the Armenian army began to (re)build itself, aided by the diaspora communities (Souleimanov, 2013, p. 109). Although he does not give any specific examples of the kind of aid that was given, he does point at the mobilization of the army and the diaspora trying to gain international support for its cause (Souleimanov, 2013, p. 167).

Both Zarifian and especially Souleimanov debate whether or not the influence of the diaspora is preferable in the conflict context. Zarifian is rather skeptical about the influence in the ongoing conflict and peace process. He highlights several cases in which the diaspora community with its active engagement annoyed others; an example being how the diaspora community has tried to gain influence in the Minsk Group, the group of outside countries trying to solve the conflict. Another example is given by Papazian: the diaspora's constant need for recognition, its ongoing distrust of Turkey and its self-classification of 'eternal victims' do not help (Papazian, 2019, p. 55). Such an alternative political agenda, which at times clashes with the economic development of Armenia, makes the diaspora's involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict more of an annoying hindrance than a contribution to a solution.

On the other hand, with its goal of one community and one identity, the diaspora community has been able to formulate a convincing argument. Sotieva et al. point at the mythology that has been created around the concept of 'strength', by all the parties involved in the conflict. They argue that the Armenians feel their position in the conflict is strong, based on the diaspora's influence, power, money and its ability to create and manipulate conflict (Sotieva et al., 2019, p. 11). So, even though the actual influence of the diaspora might be marginal, as Zarifian claims, or harmful to a peace deal, according to Souleimanov, the Armenians might not feel that way because of the surrounding myths and the idea that power is primarily related to money, which the diaspora obviously has.

In other words, there is thus no conclusive answer to whether or not the diaspora has actual influence in Armenia – and if so, to what extent. Previous research singles out the role of the diaspora, but while one perceives its involvement as minimal, the other considers it to be unnecessary, and counterproductive mingling. Once again, interviews might shed more light on this issue.

Before turning to (an analysis of) the interviews in Chapter 3, Chapter 2 includes the historical background, so as to better explain the complex history of Armenia and its diaspora, as well as highlight the different historical backgrounds and narratives of the two main actors.

Chapter 2: Historical and Political Context

To better understand the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it is important to understand their shared history. In this chapter, this history is addressed along with the political and territorial issues of Armenia and the wider the Caucasus region. In the first part of this chapter the relevant developments in the Armenian history will be addressed in chronological order, starting with the genocide and ending with the 2018 Velvet Revolution. The second part of this chapter includes two important topics of present-day Armenia.

2.1 The Armenian genocide during the Ottoman Empire

2.1.1 Lead-up to World War I; tensions between the Ottomans and Armenians
Since the early 1900s tensions between Ottomans and Armenians increased. Within the unstable Ottoman Empire, the question of 'what to do with the Armenians?' was frequently asked (Kévorkian, 2011, pp. 24, 33). The idea was either to go for a unitary state that incorporated Armenia or to declare Armenian independence (Kévorkian, 2011, p. 24).

Clashes between the Turkish government on the hand and Armenians on the other started in April 1909, with violence coming from both sides. Civil unrest among the Turkish population and the Armenian minority began because of the government's plans for creating one unitary state for its population, with no place for minorities (Morris & Ze'evi, 2019, p. 144). The first massacre, the so-called 'Cilicia massacre' (named after this region in the Ottoman Empire), took place the same month. Tensions in Cilicia had risen because of rumours that Armenians were on the verge of starting a civil war, in order to gain their independence (Morris & Ze'evi, 2019, p. 144). These rumours were so strong and persistent, that the local Turkish population thought the Armenians were only waiting for the right moment to start their attack; high-ranking officers stationed in Cilicia were also convinced of the imminent Armenian threat (Kévorkian, 2011, p. 80). The final trigger for the violence in Cilicia was the murder of two Turkish men in the city of Adana by an Armenian who was fed up with their harassment the previous days and decided to kill them (Kévorkian, 2011, p. 82). Once the news of these murders spread, the situation escalated rapidly. On

April 14, 1909, violence erupted in the entire region of Cilicia (Morris & Ze'evi, 2019, p. 144).

Initially, the violence primarily focused on destroying Armenian properties, such as houses and businesses (Kévorkian, 2011, p. 84). However, soon after, the violence was directed at Armenian citizens, with hundreds of people killed. In response, Armenians began to arm themselves (Kévorkian, 2011, p. 85). On April 18, the violence in Adana came to a halt after foreign troops (among them from Great Britain, Germany and Russia) arrived on the scene (Morris & Ze'evi, 2019, p. 144). Nevertheless, the situation remained tense, with provocations and rumours spreading on both sides (Kévorkian, 2011, p. 90). Just days later, the murder spree between the two groups reignited. On April 25 the second massacre of Adana began, lasting for two days; during that period an estimated 1,500 to 7,000 people were killed (Kévorkian, 2011, p. 94). Although after two days the violence stopped once more, the hate campaign against Armenians did not. The Armenian population was blamed for the massacres and a fierce propaganda campaign against them began (Kévorkian, 2011, p. 103).

2.1.2 World War I and the Ottoman Empire

During the years leading up to World War I, the situation in the Ottoman Empire, and also in the wider Caucasus region, became more tense (Kévorkian, 2011, p. 135). According to Astourian, the Turkish Sultan used the growing chaos by taking back power from the government (Astourian, 1990, p. 128). Not long after, the Ottoman Empire officially entered the war on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary and it soon found itself at war with British and Russian troops (Astourian, 1990, p. 137). In order to keep control over its population, the Ottoman rulers felt that oppression of its ethnic minorities best suited that goal (Marasco, 2018). Armenians were seen as a threat, given their different background, their minority status within the Ottoman Empire, competition on the job market, and Armenia's closeness to Russia (Marasco, 2018; Morris & Ze'evi, 2019, p. 144). The government once more initiated a propaganda campaign against the Armenian population, presenting them as a threat to the Ottoman Empire. This campaign landed on fertile ground. Because of the war, the Ottoman Empire was quickly running out of money; at the same time, the Armenian population was known to have gained significant wealth over the years (Marasco, 2018).

During the night of April 23, 1915, Ottoman authorities arrested a large number of Armenian intellectuals and political leaders and send them to prison. This event has subsequently become known as 'Red Sunday' (Kévorkian, 2011, p. 82). During the next month, Armenians living in the region of Van were deported and/or killed. On May 29, the government passed a law which gave it the power to deport Armenians whom they saw as a threat to the empire; large-scale deportations started soon after. In some cases, the Armenian population of entire towns was evicted from their homes and forced to walk to their deaths – the so-called 'death marches' to Deir Ez-Zor in Syria (Morris & Ze'evi, 2019, p. 213). Food and other basic needs were withheld and the number of fatalities was extremely high. The Ottoman government knew of course that leaving the Armenians in the Syrian desert without any food or water would mean a certain death. The very few people that did initially survive these death marches were put in concentration camps near the border, where they were forced to work themselves to death. Other methods of killing, such as drowning and executions, were not uncommon either, resulting in mass graves with thousands of bodies near the Syrian border. Only few managed to survive the death marches and camps by escaping to Russia and Russian Armenia (Marasco, 2018).

Although in 1915 some reports were published that a genocide was taking place and Armenians were being deported to the desert to die, given the remote location of the events, public knowledge about the extent of the massacres did not become widespread until much later. As many as 1.2 million Armenians were killed during the genocide, although a definitive number has never been established (Marasco, 2018).

While the war was raging and the Ottoman Armenians from so-called Western Armenia were sent to the Syrian border to die, Armenia joined the war on the side of the Triple Entente, joining French troops in their fight against the Ottoman Empire. After the collapse of the Russian regime and the death of Tsar Nicolas II, Armenia declared itself independent. However, the life of the first Republic of Armenia was cut short. Territorial wars with neighboring Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan seriously weakened Armenia and diminished its territory. The Treaty of Kars, signed on October 13, 1921, sealed the definitive loss of Western Armenia.

2.1.3 The aftermath; debating the acknowledgment of genocide

The debate on the acknowledgment of the genocide is still ongoing. The Turkish government has always denied the genocide during Ottoman rule, referring to the differences of opinion and the lack of a clear definition of the term 'genocide'. However, Turkey does acknowledge its involvement in the killing of Armenians during the Ottoman Empire. It argues it was part of World War I, with the Armenians joining the war on the side of the enemy, the Triple Entente (Marasco, 2018; Astourian, 1990, p. 116). Furthermore, the Turkish government states that the violence that initiated the genocide came from the Armenian side rather than the Ottoman side (Marasco, 2018). Thirdly, according to the Turkish government it was not a genocide, since the Armenians were 'simply' evicted from their country and died during the process rather than being mass murdered by the Ottoman Empire (Marasco, 2018).

The debate on the acknowledgment of the Armenian genocide is not only held in Turkey and Armenia, but around the world as well. The lobby of diaspora communities propagating recognition of genocide is particularly strong in countries like France and Russia; both countries have recognized the Armenian genocide (respectively in 1998 and 1995). Quite recently, on December 12, 2019, the US Senate officially recognized the Armenian genocide, thereby straining relations with Turkey (Edmondson, 2019). The discussion about an acknowledgment heavily impacts the European Union, also given a possible EU membership of Turkey. In the past, Turkey has warned various European countries, including the Netherlands, for the repercussions of an official acknowledgment of the Armenian genocide (RFE/RL, 2019; RTL Nieuws, 2018; Smale & Eddy, 2016; I, 2014, p. 234).

2.2 History of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is about the region of Nagorno-Karabakh or Artsakh. The region is ethnically Armenian but officially part of Azerbaijan. This led to conflict when the ethnically Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh wanted to either join Armenia or be independent from Azerbaijan.

The first crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh began in February 1988 when a protest was organized in the capital of Stepanakert. There had been some tensions before in 1987, but these were rarely documented and were deemed unimportant or suppressed by the Soviet government (De Waal, 2013, p. 18). Since 1921, Nagorno-Karabakh has been

part of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, although the majority of its population is of Armenian heritage. Local politicians wanted to change this situation and redraw the maps, so as to include the region of Nagorno-Karabakh into the Soviet Republic of Armenia (De Waal, 2013, pp. 10-11). Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had just called for *glasnost* and *perestroika* (transparency and reform), in the aftermath of which local politicians thought that redrawing the maps was finally made possible. On February 13, 1988, Armenians organized a mass protest meeting in Lenin Square, drawing attention to the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh. This was a risky move, since in the Soviet Union protest was strictly forbidden and usually forcefully disbanded by the army. The public protests resulted in a period of heightened tensions between the two groups – Armenians and Azerbaijani – who were living just miles apart. Some fighting did break out; however, the Soviet authorities did not intervene to stop the tensions between the two groups. De Waal points out that these protests, instead of coming from locals in Nagorno-Karabakh, were organized by Armenians living far off, in Moscow or Tashkent (De Waal, 2013, p. 16). Despite the protests and the involvement of Armenians living outside the region, the Soviet government refused to change the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Visits by delegations from Moscow did not result in any change in the status of Nagorno-Karabakh (Hille, 2010, p. 257).

The first violent incident took place in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait, instigated after a few days of unrest, beginning on February 27, 1988. There had already been some reports of incidents between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. The situation escalated when a Soviet military prosecutor talked on the radio about incidents in Nagorno-Karabakh and stated that violence had been used against local Azerbaijani (De Waal, 2013, p. 33). The next day, a killing spree began in Azerbaijan's capital of Baku, with Armenians being targeted, raped and killed by several mobs. The authorities were slow in reacting; it took the government in Moscow several days to take decisive action and send in troops to the region (Hille, 2010, p. 258). National news media did not report on the incidents and a definitive death toll was never officially established by Soviet officials (De Waal, 2013, p. 41).

The violence was considered to be a catastrophic event for all parties involved, with the loss of human life for the Armenians and embarrassment and shame on the Azerbaijani and Soviet side (De Waal, 2013, p. 40). After the violence in Sumgait and Baku, a war between the two 'countries' (or rather, still Soviet republics) seemed almost inevitable (De Waal, 2013, p. 44). While Azerbaijan and Moscow were trying

to work on a solution for Nagorno-Karabakh, fighting continued (Hille, 2010, p. 258). Because of a rise of conflicts in other parts of the Soviet Union, the issue of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the violence that was taking place were (temporarily) moved to the background (De Waal, 2013, p. 70).

The political instability under Soviet leader Gorbachev became even more visible throughout 1989, highlighted by the fall of the Berlin Wall. For Armenia, the chaos in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe created the opportunity of gaining independence and its leaders wasted no time in officially announcing the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh (De Waal, 2013, p. 72). On January 9, 1990, the Armenian Parliament officially declared Nagorno-Karabakh to be a part of Armenia (De Waal, 2013, p. 89). In various regions of Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh fights erupted and more Soviet troops were sent from Moscow, in an effort to stop the violence. At the same time, Azerbaijan declared itself independent from the Soviet Union. Violence broke out again in Baku, with ethnic cleansing directed towards the remaining Armenian population. Refugees were put on ferries to Turkmenistan and later flown to the Armenian capital of Yerevan (De Waal, 2013, p. 90). The official death toll has never been established, given that the Armenians were scattered over various countries, disappeared or died while being repatriated to Yerevan (De Waal, 2013, p. 90). The Soviet army acted violently; heavily-armed soldiers and tanks went on a killing spree in Baku to try to control the Azerbaijani population. (De Waal, 2013, p. 93). This showed that Moscow had lost control over Azerbaijan and that it was unable to maintain peace in the region (De Waal, 2013, p. 93; Hille, 2010, p. 257). In 1991, the new leader, Boris Yeltsin, and Kazakh President Nazarbayev managed to reach a cease-fire agreement, but it was broken soon after, another illustration of the Soviet Union losing control over the region (Hille, 2010, p. 259).

On November 26, 1991, Azerbaijan abolished the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh., immediately followed by the declaration of independence by the region itself. Armenia tried to remove itself from direct conflict by stating it had no territorial claims on any Azerbaijani territory. According to Hille, this declaration was made so as not to anger the international community, in particular Armenia's direct neighbors Turkey and Iran (Hille, 2010, p. 259). Azerbaijan followed up its annulment of the declaration of independence with new attacks on Stepanakert. On May 8, 1992, Armenia in turn responded with an attack on Shusha, a strategically important town and the final city in the region under Azerbaijani control. By taking Shusha, Armenia

created a corridor linking Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, allowing for better movement of its army and necessary supplies (Hille, 2010, p. 25). Armenia soon gained the upper hand in the conflict and started occupying Azerbaijani cities outside Nagorno-Karabakh, for instance Agdam in July 1993.

Chances were that Iran would get involved in the conflict because of the territory occupied by Armenia. Iran had to deal with a growing refugee crisis at its borders that needed immediate attention. Because of the risk of Iran's involvement, the United Nations Security Council stepped up its efforts to broker a ceasefire. In May 1994, a summit was held in Bishkek, to discuss a ceasefire and peace agreement. A ceasefire was eventually signed, but a deal involving Russian peacekeepers was never agreed to by Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh became a de facto party in the conflict and cease-fire; along with Armenia, it did allow Russian peacekeepers on its territory. Although the region remained calm after the Bishkek summit, various CSCE-led summits were held, but no major breakthroughs were reached (Hille, 2010, pp. 261-262). Nevertheless, in 1999 Armenia and Azerbaijan seemed to be close to a peace agreement, with Azerbaijani's leader Heydar Aliyev prepared to give up on Nagorno-Karabakh (De Waal, 2013, p. 5). The negotiations were never finished, however, and several months later the peace process was at a stalemate again.

Although nowadays the conflict is 'frozen', this does not mean that there are no flare-ups of violence, nor that there are no lobby activities from either side. Armenia's lobby is primarily directed at (political and financial) aid for Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as getting Russian military support (in addition, of course, to the ongoing effort to have the genocide widely recognized). Azerbaijan's lobby activities, on the other hand, focus on its territorial integrity and its oil business (Smith & Stares, 2007, pp. 120-121). Despite a ceasefire being in place since 1994, in the border regions soldiers are still being killed now and then (BBC News, 2012). Information regarding the number of fatalities is mostly supplied by the respective governments and therefore not always reliable. Both countries frequently accuse each other of violating the ceasefire, creating a tense situation (OSCE, 2017).

2.3 The Velvet Revolution of 2018

The protests that eventually initiated the Velvet Revolution began in March 2018, when Sargsyan was included as a candidate for the post of Prime Minister by the

government (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019, p. 85). This move was meant so that Sargsyan would remain in power after his second and final term as President ended, thereby ignoring the law about a maximum of two terms in office. Sargsyan had changed the Constitution in 2015 to fit his ambitions. The move was inspired by Russia's example, where Vladimir Putin became Prime Minister for four years before becoming President again during the next electoral cycle (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019, p. 91). The decision was arguably seen as controversial, with demonstrators announcing that they would block the governmental party's offices when the formal announcement would be made on April 14.

On March 31, opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan started a protest march in the northern city of Gyumri. From there, he would walk to Yerevan, arriving on April 13. During Pashinyans march, protests in Yerevan gradually escalated; the police did not try to stop the protests. Sargsyan agreed to meet Pashinyan, but the meeting lasted for just a few minutes before Sargsyan angrily walked out. Pashinyan only wanted to discuss the resignation of Sargsyan, a move the President was not willing to consider. After the meeting collapsed, the riot police arrested and detained many protesters, including Pashinyan himself. The arrest of Pashinyan and other opposition leaders backfired, however, with more people gathering that evening in Republic Square in central Yerevan, demanding the resignation of Sargsyan (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019, p. 92). The next day, the opposition leaders were released from prison and in the afternoon President Sargsyan announced his resignation on Facebook. On April 25 talks about the replacement of Sargsyan stalled, which led to a new wave of protests in the evening. On May 1, Pashinyan called for a national strike; after some political manoeuvring, as of May 7, Pashinyan was chosen as the new leader of Armenia (Foster, 2018). This so-called Velvet Revolution was arguably a success, with peaceful transition, without major violence to a new leadership.

The effects of the protests have been significant. Protesters were mainly youngsters, in particular students; people who had not experienced life in the Soviet Union. They initially called for the replacement of the leadership and modernization of the country, but they were also in favor of improving the relations between Armenia and its neighbors. The isolated position of the country results in less opportunities for young people and a high poverty rate. The lack of opportunities makes Russia the primary place for Armenians to settle (Cavoukian, 2016, p. 219). Economic improvements are necessary as – despite the steady return of diasporans – more and more Armenians

leave the country, escaping the unstable economic situation and the lack of opportunities. Investors are also not very keen to invest in a country with various borders closed (Dolukhanov, 2018). Despite protesters putting the blame on Russia, Pashinyan made it very clear that there would be no major change in Armenia's relationship with Russia (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019, p. 86).

2.4 Historical consequences

The aftermath of the Armenian genocide of 1915, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the war with Azerbaijan – it has all left Armenia with a complex historical legacy and in a difficult position. The country is at war with Azerbaijan and not on speaking terms with Turkey. With missing ties to Azerbaijan and Turkey, bordering potential allies left for Armenia are Russia, Iran and Georgia. But while Armenia has a close relationship with Russia, Georgia has, quite contrary, tried to remove itself from Russia's influence. Because of Russia's dominant role in the Caucasus, Georgia and Armenia should improve their mutual relations (Hille, 2010, p. 253). Relations with Iran have positively developed during the last decades with major trade deals in place (Hille, 2010, p. 255). However, since relations between Iran and the United States are very tense, resulting in fierce economic sanctions, this might also impact Armenia.

The outcome of the recent Velvet Revolution could have a significant effect on the international position of Armenia. Pashinyan is backed by young, Western-oriented people, in support of closer ties to Europe (Graham, 2018). Pashinyan has initiated a process of democratization within Armenia, while fighting corruption. Although he has stated that there will be no major changes in foreign relations, just by fighting corruption he will inevitably clash with the oligarchical system and its close ties to Russian politics (Graham, 2018).

2.4.1 Azerbaijani oil and its impact on the conflict

The role of Azerbaijan in describing the history of Armenia, its isolation, its diaspora community and its lobby activities, should not be ignored. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent independence, Azerbaijan has gradually expanded its oil and gas network, nowadays stretching from the Caspian Sea into Europe. The impact of the Azerbaijani fossil fuel industry and its exports on an international level is not to be underestimated. Thanks to its natural resources, Azerbaijan has been able to create a strong position regarding several issues, such as its stance in the Nagorno-

Karabakh war, countering critiques on its human rights violations, and its relations with the United States.

Azerbaijan exports its oil and gas through a network of pipelines to Europe. At the same time, this pipeline network shows the rather isolated position of Armenia in the region. For example, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline is specifically built around the territory of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, which means that neither can profit from the transport routes (Zarifian, 2014, p. 510). Armenia is also excluded from the New Silk Route project, once more because of the pressure exerted by Azerbaijan. The New Silk Route is a major Chinese economic project to revitalize and improve the infrastructure in the countries along the historical Silk Route. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad from the Caspian Sea towards Turkey is part of this New Silk Route. During the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan the existing railroad straight through the Caucasus was closed down; a new railroad has been completely rebuilt around Armenia, entirely funded by Azerbaijan and Turkey, leaving Armenia in the cold (Shepard, 2017).

Initially, the Azerbaijani fossil fuel industry got a significant boost when the Soviet Union terminated its import of Iranian gas after the 1978 Iranian revolution (Bowden et al., 2009, p. 208). New sources had to be found to fulfill the need for oil and gas. The collapse of the USSR, just a decade later, resulted in economic chaos, even economic collapse. This, in turn, caused a significant dip in the production and export of Azerbaijani gas (Bowden et al., 2009, p. 208). Right after its independence, Azerbaijan primarily traded its gas. Later on, when towards the end of the 1990s some of the current oil fields were discovered, the production and export of oil increased. The huge Shah Deniz oilfield was only discovered in 1999 and the subsequent building process of extraction and transport installations took just seven years. This illustrates the rapid development of the Azerbaijani oil industry and necessary infrastructure for transporting the oil from the Caspian Sea towards Europe (Bowden et al., 2009, p. 225). The discovery of even more oil fields in the Caspian Sea resulted in a steady decrease in the trade in gas, being replaced by a tremendous increase in the trade of oil with Georgia and Turkey.

Against the background of the continuous tensions in the oil-rich Middle East, Azerbaijan uses its position on the oil market as a negotiation chip. Given the worldwide demand for oil, Azerbaijan can almost set its own terms. The government has used it as a tool in its lobby activities regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict,

by specifically excluding Armenia from profiting from the oil exports and other trade deals in the region (Shepard, 2017). It goes without saying, that an open war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh would obviously have serious consequences for the oil companies and the export of oil from Azerbaijan to Europe.

Based on the revenues of the oil industry, Azerbaijan positions itself as an attractive tourist destination, involved in a process of constant modernization; illustrated by recently organizing events with a specific focus on Europe, such as the Europa League Final in 2019, the European Games in 2015 and since 2016 the Formula One race in the streets of Baku. Although these events are highly publicized, they also bring to light the social and economic inequalities within the country as well as the enormous expenses that come along with this modernization (Demytrie, 2015). Whereas from an economic point of view Azerbaijan has done extremely well, largely due to its oil industry, Armenia, on the other hand, is lagging behind. Cohesion between the government and the people is often lacking; the population is quite aware of the political isolation and uncertainty the country is faced with (Stronski, 2016). A lack of inclusion, combined with lacking financial benefits has led to serious frustrations. For years, Armenia has been in economic decline (Stronski, 2016). In 2016, when fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan erupted for several days, Armenia suffered heavy losses of both military equipment and territory (Stronski, 2016).

2.5 Present-day Armenia

Darieva points at Armenia's decline, following the 1988 earthquake, the Soviet Union's collapse and the ensuing economic crisis. According to her, the Armenian community in the United States initially helped by sending aid packages and medical supplies. Financial support was given for improving the infrastructure, for instance by paying for the road between Yerevan and Nagorno-Karabakh (Darieva, 2011, pp. 497-498). Another way of helping one's ancestral country is of course to migrate. Until only recently, however, the idea of returning to one's native country was more of a dream than a reality. This changed when organizations and groups started offering volunteer work, short-term stays, and visits for diaspora members. Thanks to the process of globalization, access to native countries has become easier. More often than not visits are only temporary short stays, since there is always the option to leave

at any time. For visitors to stay longer and settling permanently, government support is necessary (Darieva, 2011, p. 494).

Cavoukian notices a lack of interest among diaspora communities in day-to-day issues such as human rights violations and corruption in Armenia (Cavoukian, 2016, p. 232). According to her, the legacy of the genocide is to blame for this, as this has resulted in diaspora members following a tactic of laying low (Cavoukian, 2016, p. 232). Furthermore, the 'distance' between the diaspora and the motherland also has to do with the fact that the diaspora is primarily linked to Armenia through historical narratives rather than contemporary ties (Cavoukian, 2016, p. 232). However, as Cavoukian published her research in 2016, she could obviously not refer to those repatriates who have moved (back) to Armenia after the 2018 Velvet Revolution. Quite often these repatriates have returned to Armenia, specifically to change politics and society and help in the process of modernization (as for instance witnessed by the various interviews for this master research).

2.5.1 The role of the Ministry of Diaspora

Although the Ministry of Diaspora has officially closed and terminated its activities, it has played an important role in the return of diaspora members as well as far as the relations between Armenia and diaspora communities are concerned (Kopalyan, 2019). The news about the closure of the Ministry was not well-received among the diaspora communities, because they lost a useful connection to Armenia (Kopalyan, 2019). On the other hand, in Armenia itself the opinion regarding the ministry's closure was in general positive, referring to its bureaucratic and often dysfunctional modus operandi. Other critics of the Ministry of Diaspora stressed that it had been trying to shape people's opinions, as reported by Tuncel (2015). According to him, the diaspora was (and still is) frequently used as propaganda material, highlighting unrealistic and romanticized dimensions of the diaspora (Tuncel, 2015, p. 85), since the Ministry of Diaspora not only focused on repatriates but also tried to influence Armenians living abroad. This influencing took place, through both personal and government appeals, stressing the protection of the diaspora against extinction, stimulating a sense of national pride and patriotism. In the words of Khachig Tölölyan, professor in diaspora studies: "the only diaspora that Armenia's dominant 'elites' want is an obedient one", a "singular, traditional, sentimentalized Armenian

identity focused on the homeland, and who are willing to be subordinated to plans and programs initiated in Armenia and managed by them" (Papazian & Tölölyan, 2014).

Chapter 3: Results

So as to better understand the position of the diaspora community and the repatriates in Armenia, in particular in the context of Armenia's conflict with Azerbaijan including a possible peace solution, the topics discussed during the interviews are organized by relevance. This chapter starts with the perceived identity of members of the diaspora community and their knowledge about the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, followed by a discussion of a possible peace settlement. The second part addresses the clash between diaspora perceptions on the one hand and the still very prevalent Soviet mentality on the other. The final part of this chapter will answer the research question.

3.1 The diaspora's perceived influence on the war and a possible peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan according to the literature

Based on the literature review, the conclusion is that a strong lobby is present, which has been (partly) successful, mainly in areas such as providing material aid and financial support (Zarifian, 2014, p. 10). However, Zarifian also argues that, with the exception of aid through donations, the diaspora does not have any real, substantial influence in Armenia and the conflict with Azerbaijan – a notion which is confirmed by the interviews. Koinova (2012) blames this primarily on the very splintered character of the diaspora communities, seen as either an extension of the adopted homeland or as an autonomous group (Koinova, 2012, p. 99).

According to Darieva (2011), parts of the diaspora community, especially the younger generation, do have a certain degree of influence on and in Armenia. Younger generations tend to have a different historical narrative regarding Armenia and a different way of connecting to their ancestral land; this is for instance expressed in more general campaigns such as tree planting projects (Darieva, 2011, p. 505). These projects are, however, primarily local initiatives without any real support from the central government. Koff (2016) sees the diaspora's rather uncoordinated efforts as another reason for its lack of influence. He considers this to be a hindrance not only for the diaspora, but for the peace process as well (Koff, 2016, p. 7).

A problem that is tied with the lack of coordination, which has been pointed out in the literature and is confirmed by the interviews, is the (growing) diversity among the diaspora communities. Given the many waves of migration from Armenia to other countries, the diaspora has been spread out all over the world. These various

migration groups have all integrated into the local culture – sometimes more, sometimes less; in the process, linguistic, cultural and historical barriers with Armenia have been created (Björklund, 1993, p. 357). In this respect, Darieva (2011) points at the generational gaps within the diaspora communities as an additional factor in the growing diversity.

Gevorkyan agrees with this assessment; the diaspora communities and their possible influence are too fractured to really affect Armenia. In addition to language and cultural barriers, he also notices a geographical barrier – in the sense of (East) Armenia vs West Armenia – and in particular a distinction in the historical narratives – depending on whether or not diaspora members are (descendants of) genocide survivors – as major reasons why the influence is minimal. Gevorkyan also argues that the diaspora communities only became active in lobbying and fundraising after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Armenia's subsequent independence; a rather late effort, in his view (Gevorkyan, 2016). Finally, Darieva sees globalization and the 'cosmopolitan' views of the younger generation among the diaspora and repatriate groups as another major difference between the diaspora and Armenia (Darieva, 2011, p. 491). All of the above-mentioned factors contribute to divisions within the diaspora communities, with each group being focused on just one issue, one country and/or one project (Gevorkyan, 2016). This point of view was quite often confirmed in the interviews.

Souleimanov points at a potential threat of the diaspora's presence and influence in the region to the peace process; in his view, the involvement of the diaspora might very well lead to the creation of all kinds of conspiracy theories, creating distrust within and between the government and other actors which could in turn seriously harm the peace process (Souleimanov, 2013, p. 104). Souleimanov (2013, p. 109) also argues that the diaspora's aid in rebuilding and mobilizing the army has had a negative impact on the region, pointing out the instability, the diverging backgrounds and actors; an analysis shared in the interviews (Interviewee #2).
In the context of a lacking influence of the diaspora, Sotieva et al. (2019) bring up the notion of 'strength'. They argue that the Armenians perceive their position as strong because they have the diaspora communities on their side, including their money, lobby activities and ability to create and manipulate conflict (Sotieva et al., 2019, p. 11). This feeling of strength might influence the conflict and the peace process in either way, positive or negative.

3.2 The diaspora community's knowledge about the conflict and peace process

3.2.1 Knowledge about the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict

In general, the Armenian diaspora in the United States is characterized by a strong sense of community, with both positive and negative dimensions. A positive aspect is that the community allows for the preservation of culture, history and language. It also allows for the building of pride and patriotism. In particular in the United States, the Armenian diaspora is involved in the creation of inner-city communities, such as the Armenian community in Glendale, California. The building of national pride, patriotism and a sense of community is achieved through their educational institutions, like schools and community centers. However, an Armenian community as such also has negative aspects; the first being the constant need for the preservation of their own identity. This focus on the preservation of identity can lead to isolation and a lacking connection to people with other backgrounds, identities or opinions. In the words of one of the interviewees:

> "*Believe it or not, I didn't have any non-Armenian friends until I went to university. Which for a lot of people is very surprising and strange, but I think that speaks to how serious Armenians are when it comes to preserving their identity and culture in the diaspora.*" (Interview #15, 18/07/19)

Another interviewee gives an example of how Armenians are raised in the United States:

> "*I think it's also how you grew up. If you grew up in a family where Armenian identity is shoved down your throat all the time [...] they're more nationalist.*" (Interview #12, 12/07/19)

In other words, while the notion of a closed community of the diaspora is clearly noticeable, more negative aspects are present as well. Being closed off, under constant pressure to preserve one's own identity, even by letting children know they should marry fellow Armenians, hinders the development of diaspora members outside the communities. They only start forming their own opinions about Armenian issues as an adolescent. This is, for instance, the case of one interviewee who only met

Azerbaijani people during his college years and then heard about other perspectives regarding the war:

"*[...] at my university I even had the experience where I put myself out of my little Armenian box [...];* "*they* [Azerbaijani people] *told me about how Armenians also killed Azeri, how they lost their parents because of what happened. And that was the first time ... where I was like: this is the feeling Turks probably have*" (Interview #16, 22/07/19)

As clearly hinted at by Interviewee #16, another negative consequence of the rather closed diaspora communities and their educational system is the lack of knowledge about the conflict with Azerbaijan. Several interviewees said they only learned about the conflict after they moved to Armenia, when they left the 'Armenian bubble'. Interviewee #3:

"*Whenever we would have our 1915 commemoration marches in Los Angeles, huge amounts of crowds would come ... on all those signs you see Turkey ..., plain Turkey, Turkey this, Turkey that. [...] It is not until I came here that I realized, I thought: my God, this is more intense than it is maybe with Turkey. It is hostile.*" (Interview #3, 12/06/19)

This is also confirmed by Interviewee 7, who states:

"*I knew so little, to be honest. [...] But until I came here and even went to Nagorno-Karabakh, I really did not know the extent of what this territory was, the battle over it and [...] the ongoing conflicts.*" (Interview #7, 02/07/19)

And Interviewee #9 adds:

"*I knew nothing. Nothing. I had heard of it but to be completely honest, I didn't fully understand it. [...] didn't even realize there was an active war with Azerbaijan. It's weird how little I knew about it.*" (Interview #9, 04/07/19)

Although in general the interviewees were not always aware of the situation, there are of course exceptions. In particular interviewees who don't have an American background, but rather originate from countries in the Middle East such as Lebanon and Syria, said they have a greater amount of knowledge about the conflict and have heard about it frequently. According to Interviewee #2:

"*... we believe in this part of our history and it* [Nagorno-Karabakh] *is part of our homeland. And we even had people from Syria and Lebanon participating in the war to free the country from Azerbaijan*" (Interview #2, 12/06/19)

This illustrates the active participation of Armenians from Lebanon and Syria in the conflict with Azerbaijan, although the exact number of people from these countries joining the Armenian army in the war effort is unknown. However, elements that should be taken into account, are the more recent events in the Middle East. The conflict situation in Lebanon and the war in Syria might explain why repatriates from the Middle East are more aware of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh as well. These repatriates have seen more violence in their adoptive countries, unlike repatriates from the United States. Furthermore, the more active participation from Middle Eastern repatriates might be caused by the fact that they have more recently repatriated as compared to the descendants of genocide survivors.

3.2.2 A (possible) solution for the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict
Regardless of the differences in nationality, background and knowledge of the conflict, most of the interviewees are pessimistic about the next step. They tend to agree that a peaceful solution is not likely, nor imminent. Several interviewees even go a step further, claiming that a solution to the conflict is not going to happen, unless the other party is completely defeated and destructed. For some of the interviewees, the threat of Azerbaijan, backed up by its oil dollars, is one of the most crucial issues in Armenia today. Interviewee #6 states diplomatically:

"*I don't think... I don't even want to say this, because it is so negative... I don't think there is an outcome that both parties would find fair or favorable.*"
(Interview #6, 02/07/19)

Interviewee #9 is also skeptical about a possible peace solution for Nagorno-Karabakh:

> "*My gut says 'no', only because people have their beliefs and they are like… this is our land without stopping to really think or learn. They are just so hard-headed.*" (Interview #9, 04/07/19)

Interviewee #11 takes a political stance regarding the conflict and Azerbaijan:

> "*Opening borders, that would definitely be something that would be good. But I think when you are dealing with a dictatorship, that is going to be tough.*" (Interview #11, 11/07/2019)

And, finally, on this issue, Interviewee #13 adds:

> "*I do think war is inevitable. That region is very volatile and it doesn't seem politics is taking it in the right way. I hope that is not the case. But it's looking that way.*" (Interview #13, 16/07/19)

Although the specific wordings might differ for each of the interviewees, a high degree of skepticism about a peaceful solution to the conflict is nevertheless noticeable. Some of this skepticism can be linked to the feelings of national pride and stubbornness of the Armenians, which Interviewee #9 refers to. To some of the repatriates Azerbaijan is a bigger threat to Armenia, in contrast to the more traditional diaspora's focus on Turkey as the enemy.

The question of whether war is inevitable, was in almost all interviews answered in the affirmative; see for instance Interviewee #13. However, Interviewee #16 states:

> "*I almost feel that there is more political or financial gain from what's going on now, compared to having a war break out.*" (Interview #16, 22/07/19)

This last point regarding the financial gain of the stalemate, is an interesting addition. As pointed out by Zarifian, so far, during the stalemate, the diaspora lobby has not

been very successful in helping in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, except for providing financial aid of about five to ten million dollars a year for Nagorno-Karabakh for development projects (Zarifian, 2014, p. 510). On the other hand, with the stalemate still in place, Armenia is totally excluded from major US Aid-supported projects, such as the Silk Route and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (Shepard, 2017; Zarifian, 2014, p. 510). At the same time, Azerbaijan has become a major oil supplier in the world. This begs the question whether the stalemate is just profitable for Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, rather than for Armenia. As mentioned previously, the Armenian lobby has also failed in getting the question of independence for Nagorno-Karabakh on the American political agenda.

For the repatriates the need to be actively involved in the war and peace process is not as prominent, however. Some of the repatriates stated they were too busy with their own businesses to get involved in the conflict or the peace process. Examples of repatriates who are involved in the conflict and peace process are mostly volunteer-based, such as an internship at the HALO Trust. During the interviews, repatriates said that they had visited Nagorno-Karabakh and that they try to help through donations and such. However, none of the interviewees were actively involved in the conflict's resolution, distancing themselves from the politics behind this process as well.

3.3 The Soviet mentality and Armenia's modernization

Regardless of the many contributions of diaspora community members and repatriates that have moved back to Armenia, there appears to be a significant distinction between diaspora members, repatriates and Armenians (Björklund, 1993, p. 357). Not many repatriates feel a complete integration is possible; the primary reason for this being the Soviet legacy. Interviewee #8 states:

> "*There will always be – and is – a great divide between local Armenians and the diaspora ones. And I can't honestly say that you can fully integrate with the local thing [...]. I understand the local mentality, but in the diaspora, you just grow up the same exact way, same exact mentality. You didn't have seventy years of Soviet things to compete within the mindset, you know?*" (Interview #8, 03/07/19)

Interviewee #3 adds:

"*The Soviet Union is deeply embedded in the Armenians that live and are raised here.*" (Interview #3, 12/06/19)

The Soviet legacy is perceived as a major hurdle by the diaspora members if they were to increase their influence through financial investments; at the same time this past history might block a potential resettlement by repatriates. In general, this also causes differences in political views between diaspora members, repatriates and local, native Armenians. This echoes the assessment of Mkrtchyan (2008), who argues that social adaption is one of the biggest hurdles in the process of integration of repatriates into Armenian society. While Björklund links this primarily to the 'Soviet mentality', Mkrtchyan connects it to the contemporary social and economic difficulties confronting repatriates in their process of integration (Mkrtchyan, 2008, p. 706).

Interviewee #8 is critical of the aid given by the diaspora to schools, specifically referring to the Soviet mentality and corruption as being major hindrances (Interview #8, 03/07/19). Schools might be repaired thanks to diaspora investments, but the quality of the education and the teachers is unchanged, and Soviet-style corruption as well as the negative Soviet mentality are still around:

"*I've spent a lot of time inside these schools. They get a shiny school, but what is inside the school never changes. You get the same awful Soviet time teachers, just yelling at the kids […] Awful, awful thing. You get a principal that is highly corrupt and they're just putting money in their pocket. […]. So again, big shiny school, photo opportunity, but everything inside is just as terrible. And that is one of the shiny schools and I am outside with the kids and I am like: why aren't you guys in class? And they are like: its physical education time. I am like: where is the teacher? They are: he is probably at home drunk, he doesn't show up most of the time.*" (Interview #8, 03/07/19)

This example shows that, although the money originating from the diaspora communities are spent on improving one aspect, other aspects are completely ignored; if that doesn't change, the Soviet mentality will not disappear. With this example, #interviewee 8 names a second negative aspect, feeling that some of the donations done by the diaspora are mainly for a good appearance. Other interviewees partially

agree with this assessment and are critical of the possible influence of the diaspora in Armenia. They feel that the involvement of the diaspora are primarily about the genocide, photo opportunities and money, with the newly build school as a example of the diaspora's influence through money only. Other repatriates however do see some kind of positive influence through the diaspora, but primarily through investments and donations for Armenia's development in infrastructure and real estate.

Also, various repatriates point out that progress has been made regarding the issue of corruption in Armenia. It is important to note in this respect that, according to Stronski, corruption was one of the most pressing issues during the Sargsyan government (Stronski, 2016). Fighting this endemic corruption has been one of the target points of Pashinyan's government, which has been in office since 2018. Interviewee #11 argues:

> *"I mean, I think all sectors have been affected to some degree by the revolution. Bribes, I just bought an apartment here and no one has mentioned... I've tried to bribe. And they're scared and they say: 'absolutely not'. That guy, he was taking forever for me to get my gas, I still don't have gas in the apartment and I went to the gas place. I was like: is there anything I can do and they said: 'no'."*
> (Interview #11, 11/07/19)

This personal anecdote illustrates how trying to buy someone off apparently doesn't work anymore; people in the service industry are afraid of the consequences of accepting a bribe. In line with this, Interviewee #2 brings up the border checks and how the import of products has changed since the revolution of 2018:

> *"...the import and export et cetera, were maintained in a way that you should bribe in order to overcome the obstacles. They were written in a way that you cannot... You get puzzled, don't have any other way until you bribe. Now they have to work to improve or to change. It is a revolution and in a revolution for its effects to, you know, for you to see the fruits or the results, you need to give them some time."* (Interview #2, 12/06/19)

3.4 The influence of the diaspora in Armenia

Based on the interviews it is clear that most interviewees feel the diaspora's influence is mainly, if not solely, based on money and investments. The opinions are, however, divided over the issue whether or not this has an impact on Armenia.

The opinions about the influence of the diaspora concerning the recognition of the Armenian genocide are clearer, much more one-sided. In this respect, Interviewee #8 extensively elaborates on the possible influence of the diaspora on Armenian-Turkish relations. He feels that the diaspora is focused too much on the genocide, which he perceives to be a serious threat to the future of the entire Armenian diaspora (Interview #8, 03/07/19). While the diaspora is primarily focused on Turkey and a recognition of the genocide, the current relations between Turkey and Armenia are far more relaxed than they might appear. Turkish products are sold in Armenian stores, Armenians can visit Turkey by travelling through Georgia or by directly flying to Istanbul, and although the border between Armenia and Turkey is officially closed, exceptions to cross are made for local farmers. There is no imminent danger of an escalation of violence; besides, the border is patrolled by Russian forces instead of Armenian and Turkish soldiers (Interview #8, 03/07/19).

Interviewee #8 also referred to the issue of the diaspora and money:

"[...] Armenians only think of people as important, when they have lots of money. And they get given this grand tour and get taken to see the head of the church [...]. But I don't think [they have] *actual influence, no."* (Interview #8, 03/07/19)

In other words, he does not feel that diaspora money buys influence in Armenia.

Other interviewees have also hinted at Turkey being the sole focus of the diaspora. Interviewee #2 brings up the tensions between the diaspora lobby and former Armenian president Sargsyan about Turkey:

"... to start the Turkish-Armenian discussions or something like that. All the diaspora stood clear of that... I cannot remember when was the conflict exactly, but they stopped Serzh Sargsyan from continuing this Turkish-Armenian relationship." (Interview #2, 12/06/19)

He adds that this was only made possible thanks to the financial investments by diaspora community members, but that they will not play a role in Armenia otherwise (Interview #2, 12/06/19). This rather skeptical perception regarding the (limited) influence of the diaspora is also confirmed in interview #4, acknowledging the financial support given by the diaspora but at the same time stating that it is perceived as the only influence they have. The financial aid given is primarily used to build schools, factories and other such projects (Interview #4, 13/06/19).

Interviewee #13 makes an interesting comment regarding the funds that have been donated:

"... *and so, if we have rich Armenian families, organizations that have the money to fund Artsakh. And if they chose to fund it in its military, who am I to say no to that?*" (Interview #13, 16/07/19)

Interviewee #13 is the only person to specifically bring up this dimension of financial aid; and he does not perceive it negatively.

Papazian has investigated the extent to which the genocide and the subsequent victimization resulted in a divide between Armenia proper and its diaspora; a divide that has significantly hampered development (Papazian, 2019, p. 55). The findings of Papazian, are echoed by various interviewees.

Several interviewees say that the focus of the diaspora on Turkey is reflected in the way in which they were educated. Interviewee #10 states that students are generally taught a specific history and based on this, they develop a dislike of the Turkish government. This feeling, however, dissipated when she visited Turkey and Western Armenia. The local people were very hospitable, regardless of her Armenian heritage. Nowadays, she feels that these negative feelings should be changed into more positive ones (Interview #10, 08/07/9).

Interviewee #16 talks about the role of the genocide in the diaspora:

"*I grew up very involved in our community and there is a very victimization kind of environment […] going to those protests and yelling and fighting for something and you're saying: this is the reason we're in this situation, which in my mind… I am like: you're in a pretty good situation.*" (Interview #16, 22/07/19)

He feels the diaspora frequently places itself in a position of victimization. Interviewee #13 also acknowledges the victimization, but he is more optimistic about changes for the better. When asked about a possible chip on the shoulder of the diaspora, he answered:

> "*Not even the history of the diaspora, the history Armenia. The reason the diaspora exists is because of the genocide. And for that, we've just been... We like victimizing ourselves, but I see that changing now and it's a beautiful thing."*
> (Interviewee #13, 16/07/19)

Just like Interviewee #16, Interviewee #15 also mentions that the Armenian diaspora members tend to stick to their own group; he only stepped outside of this secluded group when he went to university (Interview #15, 18/07/19). These are just two of the many examples of interviewees breaking away from 'the Armenian bubble' when leaving for university and as a consequence looking at the entire situation in another, more neutral way.

Finally, Interviewee #8 is rather harsh as far as the influence of the diaspora on Armenia is concerned, by stating:

> "*Also, living in the diaspora, you learn nothing about this place, they just tell you about genocide. Every once in a while, you hear a small bit of news, but your average 'diasporan' knows nothing about Armenia. I mean, they might have come on a visit or two, even then they only learn so much, being a tourist. In general, the first time I came here, I knew nothing. I knew absolutely nothing about this place. But the diaspora itself, it has weakened to nothing-ness."*
> (Interviewee #8, 03/07/19)

Interviewee #14 is less critical of the diaspora, however, although he also states:

> "*Yeah, I think that the diaspora needs to be more... needs to have more awareness on this issue, because all you hear is genocide and earthquake. You hear news about Azerbaijan, but they don't really know what's up. I mean, at least the people I know. And I think they should be more informed on current issues rather than the issues we had a century ago. And, yes, they could have a*

big role because 'diasporans' have a lot of power in Western countries. So yeah, they totally should practice." (Interview #14, 17/07/19)

The conclusion that diaspora members do not appear to influence everyday life and Armenian-Turkish relations, does not mean that they sit on their hands, as Zarifian (2014) suggests. Zarifian points at various examples of smaller diaspora lobby groups that focused on Turkish-Armenian relations. One such example deals with the nomination of a new American Ambassador to Armenia. The lobby groups successfully blocked his nomination, referring to his position on the Armenian genocide. Despite this rather small success, there has not been any real result regarding the position and improvement of the diaspora or Armenia on a government level, however (Zarifian, 2014, p. 510).

3.5 The repatriates' influence and its effect on the war and peace process

A significant factor in determining the (diverging) influence of repatriates and diaspora members concerns the way in which aid is given. While the diaspora community in general supports Armenia through financial donations and activities meant to develop the infrastructure, repatriates often support their ancestral country by other means, for instance through start-ups of businesses such as IT companies and sustainable energy companies. In addition, there is also a substantial group of Lebanese and Syrian repatriates working in the hospitality business, running their own restaurants and cafes. When asked during the interviews if repatriates feel whether or not they influence Armenia, examples such as the ones given above are often brought up.

When asked whether they feel they influence Armenia's government and conflict resolution efforts, the answers are less positive, however. Some examples were given of repatriates who have held or still hold government positions, for instance the current Minister of Aviation, Revazyan. However, these were individual cases and not signs of an active involvement by repatriates, making their effect only marginal. As far as international affairs and in particular the conflict with Azerbaijan is concerned, any influence from repatriates is hardly present.

When asked if repatriates have influence, Interviewee #5 responds:

"*Yes, I don't know if they…, we have a strong influence but we are helping Armenia to be more powerful and more open to the world. And we are doing our best to the economy because every 'repat' is coming and bringing lots of money, they are buying land and buying homes.*" (Interview #5, 25/06/19)

She adds:

"*Repats, they can only stay and help the country – make the economy rise and […] you have a strong community and strong investment in this country […] Anyone, like Azerbaijan and Turkey, they will think twice when they plan a war or something. Because everybody has a good economy and when we have a good economy, it is a little bit harder for any country to do any kind of attack.*" (Interview #5, 25/06/19)

In other words, an improved and growing economy, partly brought about by repatriates, is perceived as a way to prevent an escalation of the conflict with Azerbaijan.

Within the diaspora community as well among the repatriates the position of Turkey is a complicated one. Relations between Armenia and Turkey have become less strained over the years and some trade is taking place between the two countries. This state of affairs leads to a kind of annoyance among the diaspora and repatriates:

"*There are some things that are between the people that are… for example, we are Armenians from the diaspora and we don't buy anything Turkish by origin. Here the market is flooded by them. They* [diaspora] *even lose some of the words that are Turkish by origin and their language* [Armenian] *includes them.*" (Interview #4, 13/06/19)

This opinion, however, is rather rare among the interviewees. None of the interviewees specifically mentioned that they don't want to buy any Turkish products because of the genocide. For instance, in contrast to Interviewee #4 who is annoyed about the Turkish products and Turkish language in Armenia, Interviewee 12 is more resigned:

> "*I know there is a lot of anger at Turkey. I can understand that, because I grew up with a family that escaped the genocide too.*"

But:

> "*... I think there are already so many products from Turkey in Armenia, so I think* [it] *might be more beneficial to work on those relationships.*" (Interview #12, 12/07/19)

When specifically asked whether repatriates think they had any influence in Armenia, Turkey and the recognition of the genocide were not brought up as examples. Although not a conclusive answer, this might mean that the repatriates do not feel that relations between the diaspora community and Turkey are influenced by them or they do not think this specific debate needs their attention. A simple explanation for the possible lack of involvement in diaspora-Turkey relations might be the repatriates' focus on their respective jobs and businesses. When asked about their possible influence in Armenia, the businesses that had been set up by the repatriates were almost always named as prime examples of their influence on Armenian society.

The element of modernization is one of the prime motivations for the repatriates to move back to Armenia. Not only because they perceive it to be their heritage, but also because they feel it is their ultimate destiny to move back to their ancestral country and help to rebuild it after the fall of the Communist regime and the devastating war with Azerbaijan. This often takes place through volunteer work, for instance with Birthright Armenia. The biggest hurdles for a permanent move are the financial difficulties in Armenia. Several repatriates brought up the difficulty of finding the necessary capital to start and maintain their newly-created businesses. For this reason, several of them temporarily returned to the United States in order to quickly earn enough money to fund their Armenian-based businesses. These repatriates therefore maintain ties to the United States, even though they do not necessarily feel connected to that country anymore, nor do they want to move back

To conclude, Interviewee #8 fittingly describes the role of repatriates in Armenia as:

"*The role of repats... I mean, there is a lot of different things, but in basic just being a good example, being able to be more organized in a more Western way in order of doing things and getting rid of the Soviet habits. Because Soviet habits aren't a productive way of moving forward, it doesn't have sustainability to it.*" (Interview #8, 03/07/19)

In other words, Interviewee #8 links the influence of repatriates to Western ideals and society, pointing out Armenia's Soviet legacy and the negative effects it has had and still has on Armenia today.

3.6 The diaspora's influence and its effect on the war and peace process

3.6.1 The interviews

It is quite obvious that the Armenian lobby is active, especially in the American political context. At the same time, it appears as if the diaspora as such does not have much influence on Armenia's government, nor on the conflict with Azerbaijan. Interviewee #14 gives a simple explanation for the lack of influence of the diaspora in the conflict:

"*But coming here, it gives you a whole new perspective because the diaspora focuses so much on diaspora and earthquake that you don't know anything about modern-day Armenia.*" (Interview #14, 17/07/19)

Interviewee #6 only sees the influence from an economic perspective:

"*It is hard, because before moving here diasporans are like…, oh we give money, more money. Like money solves everything. It is kind of hard: what do you do with it? You buy more weapons, you do this...*" adding, "*...where the money comes from, is where the influence comes from.*" (Interview #6, 02/07/19)

She further explains that some repatriates have a less direct, albeit still controversial approach to giving support, by proposing to repopulate Nagorno-Karabakh with repatriates.

Interviewee #7 also thinks that the diaspora's influence in the conflict is mostly based on money. At the same time, she adds another element to the discussion of the diaspora's influence:

"I do not think they [the Armenian government] *want more distance* [from the diaspora]*, because economically that does not sound logical to me. It makes more sense to have stronger ties, stronger connections, and bring in more money and essentially allies."* (Interview #7, 02/07/19)

She does however state that the Armenian government is using the diaspora's influence in their favor to gain allies.

Finally, Interviewee #15 points out the diaspora's lobby in the United States as an influence:

"I know that the Armenian lobby in the United States is always trying to block Azerbaijani oil money or caviar money from influencing US Congress members into passing legislation that benefits Azerbaijan. And that would be detrimental to Armenia and Artsakh." (Interview #15, 18/07/19)

However, when asked whether this brings actual influence, he replies by saying that this is not the case, pointing out that the diaspora's agenda does not always match Armenia's best interests. (Interview #15, 18/07/19)

Interviewee #2 feels that the diaspora should be more involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, she does acknowledge the international difficulties this might bring along. When asked about whether the diaspora should help, she states:

"Yeah, they have to. If there is a war, we should not leave Artsakhi's alone because Artsakh is part of Armenia. We cannot leave the local Armenians alone because we feel a belonging..." (Interview #2, 12/06/19)

However, she also sees the problems of the diaspora's influence:

"They should play a constructive role in building this society, not in the politics so much. It is very complex for understanding, because every one of them is

coming from different places and, for example, if the government here asks for American-Armenians, that might raise another conflict with Russia." (Interview #2, 12/06/19)

The quotes by interviewee #2 perfectly sums up the results from this analysis. The complex nature of both the involvement of the diaspora and the repatriates in Armenia as well as the conflict with Azerbaijan complicate the ongoing modernization and development of Armenia due to the many different actors and factors involved.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusion

This thesis started with a clear focus: *Conflict resolution in the Caucasus: how and to what extent has the diaspora influence in Armenia and how does this affect the war effort as well as a possible peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan?* The research has paid attention to various key elements that highlight the differences between members of the diaspora communities, repatriates and locals. It also addresses the extent of the influence of the diaspora and repatriates relating to conflict resolution.

4.1 Discussion

4.1.1 Differences between the diaspora, repatriates and local Armenians

An element limiting the formation of one, overarching Armenian identity is the role of education among Armenian communities. During the interviews, several respondents talked about how they felt that the diaspora was stuck in the past while present-day Armenia is quite different. They were brought up with stories about the Armenian genocide and how recognition and acknowledgment of this event, even over a hundred years later, is still one of the biggest issues guiding the diaspora lobby. While diaspora communities nowadays still consider Turkey as being 'the enemy', Armenians experience it differently. They perceive the influence of Azerbaijan as way more threatening. Turkey and Armenia are on better terms, with Turkish products in the stores and even border crossings possible for some. Interviewees in general – unlike the dominant opinion among diaspora communities – also see an improvement in the relationship between Turkey and Armenia as an important contribution to getting Armenia out of its present isolation.

This element of a diaspora-focused education also becomes noticeable when the repatriate respondents were asked about the conflict with Azerbaijan. Several interviewees stated that they were hardly taught about this issue during their education at Armenian schools; some only learned more about this conflict by themselves out of interest.

Based on the findings, one might conclude that, although the Armenians claim to be one group, there are significant and important differences that eventually form obstacles that hinder the assimilation into one group.

4.1.2 The Soviet Mentality and Armenia's modernization

The Soviet legacy and its impact on Armenia have also become quite visible during this research. The Soviet legacy and the differences in history and mentality clearly clash with the repatriates who have mostly grown up in the United States. In particular the corruption, both on local and governmental level, hinders the repatriates' integration in Armenia.

The element of modernization is one of the prime motivations for the repatriates to move back to Armenia. Because they perceive it to be their heritage, but also because they feel it is their ultimate destiny to move back to their ancestral country and help to rebuild it after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the devastating war with Azerbaijan. However, financial difficulties hamper a permanent move. Because of this, several of the repatriates moved back to the United States temporarily to earn enough money to fund their newly created businesses. This therefore means that the repatriates maintain their ties to the United States, although they do not necessarily feel a connection to the United States anymore.

4.1.3 The repatriates influence and its effect on the war and possible peace process

Whether or not repatriates have actual influence has been difficult to determine. The repatriates that have been interviewed did not have high positions within the Armenian government. Several noted that this is exactly why their influence is difficult to establish. However, the repatriates who were interviewed are socially and economically active in Armenia. They have started their own businesses, are employed in IT or work in the hospitality sector. So, although there is no clear and significant evidence that the repatriates have a major influence in Armenia, they do have a significant influence on a local level. They are trying to change and improve Armenia through their own business ventures, starting on a small scale.

The same might be said about the question of whether the repatriates have any major influence in the conflict with Azerbaijan. On a governmental level they do not appear to have influence. They do, however, have very strong opinions about the conflict and in particular on how and whether it could and should be solved. Several respondents have worked on a volunteer basis in Nagorno-Karabakh and are aware of the precarious situation there.

Finally, several interviewees have specifically pointed out how the diaspora community buys influence in Armenia through money. By donating money to projects in Armenia, influence in the Armenian government can be gained. This money is mostly used for the funding of infrastructure improvements, military equipment and educational projects.

4.1.4 The diaspora's influence and its effect on the war and peace process

Based on the 17 interviews conducted with repatriates from various countries, it can be concluded that the diaspora communities as such do not have a significant influence in Armenia, its government and the conflict with Azerbaijan. According to the findings in the literature, the lobby activities in the United States primarily focus on the recognition of the genocide and other rather limited goals, such as the nomination of ambassadors or federal aid for Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (Zarifian, 2014, pp. 509-510). Although these might be good goals for a relatively small country, the bigger issues are not dealt with, such as the opening of the border with Turkey, the chance to benefit from the booming oil business in the region, let alone a resolution of the conflict with Azerbaijan (Zarifian, 2014, p. 510).

The interviewees partially agree with this assessment. Some of them are very critical when asked about the possible influence of the diaspora in Armenia, feeling it is only about the genocide, money and photo opportunities. Others do see some kind of influence of the diaspora, but only through the investments and donations that are made for the development of Armenia's infrastructure and real estate.

Finally on this issue, one of the explanations for a lack of influence of the diaspora refers to the differences between the various groups. There are many and major differences regarding language, culture, history, geography, generations and narratives, resulting in a fractured, splintered diaspora.

4.2 Conclusion

Although diaspora members more often than not claim that they are Armenian through and through, the reality is quite different. Much of what is going on in present-day Armenia is unknown to the diaspora. In schools, current topics such as the war with Azerbaijan, are not taught as frequently as the genocide is. Repatriates have stated that they only began to learn about this once they visited Armenia – or on their own initiative in college. This state of affairs creates a divide between the

diaspora, the repatriates and the locals. It was to be expected that a gap exists between the diaspora and the locals, given the differences in upbringing. The gap between the diaspora and the repatriates is however more unexpected. The repatriates are stuck between their diaspora upbringing and their current life in Armenia, between the past and the present.

This raises the question of how the diaspora should proceed to establish and guarantee a future for themselves. Their lobby for recognition as victims of genocide is still in full swing and more and more countries are acknowledging the genocide. At the same time, however, the war and relations with neighboring Azerbaijan are still unresolved; a solution in not in sight. Although this issue does obviously not seem that important to the diaspora communities, it really does affect Armenia directly. Based on the findings of this research, stronger and better information for all Armenians about the issues that are impacting the lives of the people seems to be necessary. Only through proper and adequate communication might it be possible to maintain and strengthen the close-knit Armenian identity and community, created over the years. Strengthening the bond, based on contemporary issues rather than historical narratives, is the best way to improve the position of Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and the diaspora.

Final Words

The research for and writing of this thesis has been quite an adventure. When I started, I never expected that this topic would turn out to be so broad, with so many perspectives involved. For instance, this thesis could not have been written without including a necessary historical chapter, encompassing everything from the genocide to the Velvet Revolution, quite literally one hundred plus years of history. It has, however, been extremely useful and inspiring to interview the repatriates, who have uprooted themselves at a young age to settle in a familiar, yet completely new country, with the prime aim of improving and rebuilding it.

To sum up the extent of this research and the differences among the various actors involved, I like to end with a rather long quote from Interviewee #15, summing up both the positive and negative elements of the diaspora community and its role in Armenia – thereby making it the perfect quote to finish this thesis. When asked about the future of state-diaspora affairs in Armenia, Interviewee #15 responded:

"*The diaspora exists in schools, in houses, in restaurants, in clubs, in gatherings, you know? And that's very intangible, whereas Armenia is much more tangible because it is a state, it is a country with borders. And ultimately ..., I think that [...] they are so different from each other in essence ... the diaspora has its own culture and Armenia has its own culture. The diaspora has its own experience and Armenia has its own experience. You know, diasporans didn't experience the earthquake, they didn't experience the war, they didn't experience the Soviet Union or the collapse of the Soviet Union. But the diaspora experienced the genocide and the trauma of living in the diaspora.*
It is hard for me to imagine close relations between the two. I don't know what they look like. And I don't know how they could be meaningful. When, at the end of the day, the diasporan is gonna fly back to Los Angeles tomorrow and live a very different, radically different lifestyle than this person who is gonna stay here, in this local Armenia. So ... I don't know." (Interview #15, 18/07/19)

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