

Mama, I'm an Immigrant:
The Influence of Russian Immigrants on the Development of the Cultural Sphere
of Armenia

by

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Abstract

This study explores the integration process of Russian immigrants into Armenian society and their influence on the cultural sphere of Armenia. Three immigrant founders of the culture-related businesses and the Head of the Migration Service of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure of Armenia were interviewed. Thematic analysis showed that the Russian immigrants involved in different branches of the cultural sphere of Armenia (entertainment culture, food culture, and education) influence the development of the corresponding spheres by opening new businesses, encouraging competition, and bringing educational and entertaining input to society. Although the influence of immigrants in terms of cultural development has positive tendencies, both the immigrants and the local population face challenges during the integration processes the immigrants undergo.

Key words: Migration, Integration, Russian Immigrants, Cultural Influence

Mama, I'm an Immigrant

It is a dark, tiny, stuffy place. The only source of light is directed to a small stage with black curtains and a single microphone standing in the middle of the scene. In a couple of minutes, someone will go up on the stage. For the following twenty minutes, the person on the stage will talk about their romances, childhood, relationships with their parents, and all the other topics that constitute the life of an ordinary human being. Several dozens of people sitting in this stuffy place will laugh, finding themselves in the stories of a complete stranger. The main topic that will be voiced from that tiny stage will, most probably, be migration.

The place is located in the center of Yerevan. Here, miles away from their home, comics from Russia founded Ari StandUp Club, a place where both immigrant and local stand-up comics can come up on stage and talk about what bothers them. For the founders, the most relevant topic in the last several months is migration.

Migration, in general, has always been a part of human history. Internal and external migration played an important role in the development of different aspects of human life. In the 21st century, migration has become a relevant topic in popular discourse as geopolitical events triggered significant waves of migration worldwide. Armenia, too, has become an epicenter of immigration lately. The Russian-Ukrainian war (2022) caused thousands of migrants to come to Armenia searching for shelter and stability or escaping the severe political or social conditions.

However, even though migration is an essential part of a common discourse, academic studies and media outlets prioritize the political and economic aspects of migration, leaving social and cultural issues out of the scope of the research. Meanwhile, the mix of cultures caused by migration is an important factor contributing to the development of the country hosting the immigrants.

In the process of assimilation, Russian immigrants are transforming Armenian society and the environment into which they are being integrated. Immigrant-hosted bars and restaurants have opened,

expanding the food culture. Art and entertaining spaces have pushed the development of performative culture. Photographers, videomakers, and producers influence visual art. Various fields of the Armenian cultural sphere have gained more professionals to contribute to its development.

This project aims to analyze how the Armenian cultural sphere is changing under the influence of Russian immigrants. It will explore what fields get the most prominent influence, to what extent the Armenian general population and professionals are involved in these transformative processes and identify the directions for further development of the cultural sphere in Armenia.

Literature review

In the 21st century, migration has become an essential part of discourse worldwide. Geopolitical processes happening in the world force people to migrate, seeking shelter, better life, and personal development. While economic and political aspects of migration are widely covered in scholarly research and journalistic reports, the social and cultural aspects of migration gain less attention. Meanwhile, the interactions that happen in the process of integration of immigrants into the new society result in the major cultural development of the hosting country.

For further concern, it is essential to understand the processes both immigrants and hosting society face in the course of integration. One of the central phenomena immigrants experience is cultural shock. In his article, *Cultural Shock and Adaptation*, Michael Winkelman (1994) explores four stages of cultural shock, from the idealization of the new culture to crises and facing negative experiences to reorientation and adaptation and to the acculturation phase. Within this framework, Winkelman suggests several practical theories for managing cultural shock and scenarios of adaptation of the immigrants. The cultural shock phenomenon is applied

to analyzing the case of immigrants in Armenia, as the adaptation process of immigrants is stipulated by the cultural shift this group of people undergoes.

The behavioral patterns of immigrants and the host population are essential in the communication between these two groups. Dr. Larissa Remennick (2003), in her research, *What Does Integration Mean? Social Insertion of Russian Immigrants in Israel*, concludes four main issues repatriates face during the process of integration: 1) linguistic assimilation, 2) adaptation to the mainstream economy, 3) informal communication, 4) shifts in the cultural and media consumptions (Remennick, 2003, p. 23). Analyzing the issues, Remennick identified two related phenomena that result in two contradictory patterns of behavior: socio-cultural integration vs. separatism. My research applies Remennick's theory to the case of immigrants in Armenia. Analyzing the four issues suggested by Remennick, the research identifies whether socio-cultural integration and separatism are evident in immigrants in Armenia and, if so, in what proportion.

Aleksandra Grzymala-Kazlowska in her article, *Social Anchoring: Immigrant Identity, Security and Integration Reconnected?* (2016), suggests another theory that may support and complement the previously discussed behavioral patterns – social anchoring. Grzymala-Kazlowska argues that immigrants in the new environment tend to find "standing points," limiting their identity and absorbing the elements of the new environment in order to adjust their identity to the new culture or form a completely new one. Applying the theory of social anchoring to the case of immigrants in Armenia provides a basis to analyze the relations between the immigrants and local culture. This research identifies what specific elements of Armenian culture are most common for immigrants to assimilate due to the elements' prominence or requisite for the adaptation to the local life.

On the opposite side of the process of integration is the population of the hosting country. An essential function of the local population is that it forms the environment the immigrants have to absorb. In this process, specific behavioral patterns are inherent to the hosting society as well. Jeannie Haubert and Elizabeth Fussell (2006), in their article, *Explaining Pro-Immigrant Sentiment in the U.S.: Social Class, Cosmopolitanism, and Perceptions of Immigrants* compare two common theories of intergroup competition – "pro- and anti-immigrant sentiments," and behavioral patterns that stipulate them. Haubert and Fussell conclude that individuals who reject ethnocentrism, have higher education, have more liberal worldviews, and have an experience of living abroad tend to have more favorable views regarding immigrants. While ethnocentrism and strong national and ethnic identity are associated with a non-acceptance of immigrants. As Armenia is a homogeneous country, with an overwhelming majority of ethnic Armenian population, Haubert and Fussell's theory provides an essential basis to analyze the response the local population has towards the immigrants and the general environment they form.

Hiromi Taniguchi (2021), in his article, *National Identity, Cosmopolitanism, and Attitudes Toward Immigrants*, also finds a correlation between nationalism and xenophobia. Building his research upon several previous studies and analyzing the population of 33 states, Taniguchi finds a direct association between the strength of national identity and xenophobia. Countries that tend to be more acceptive of immigrants have a weaker national identity, and the countries with stronger national identities are more xenophobic. Taniguchi's findings, applied to the Armenian population in general, give a basis for the analysis of the correlation between Armenian national identity and communication of the local population with immigrants.

The theoretical framework provided by Michael Parzer and Franz Astlieithner's research (2017), *More than Just Shopping: Ethnic Majority Consumers and Cosmopolitanism in Immigrant Grocery Shops*, provides my own study a basis to broaden and reinforce the relations between immigrant entrepreneurship and local culture. Parzer and Astlieithner conclude that consumers of immigrant shops are consuming not only the product but rather seeking five specific experienceable categories: “consuming nostalgia, consuming patronage, consuming change, consuming alterity, and consuming diversity” (Parzer & Astlieithner, 2017, p. 1117). These findings provide my research with a framework to categorize the consumers of Armenian immigrant businesses and identify what experiences they seek to gain. This analysis supports the previously discussed issues of both immigrants and the hosting population. It identifies what aspects are lacking in the lives of these two groups and what they try to fulfill, giving preferences to immigrant businesses.

However, discussing immigration in the context of Armenia, it is important to understand the regional and geopolitical specificities. Taras Kuzio (2005), in his research, *Western Multicultural Theory and Practice and Its Applicability to the Post-Soviet States*, argues that Western multicultural theory is not applicable to the post-Soviet states due to the historical and geopolitical background and complexity of the identities in the region, including ethnic conflicts. Kuzio contrasts two essential terms, "immigrants" and "colonists." Hence, due to the context of this research, the formal division of these concepts is essential. Kuzio's theory provides the research with a basis to understand the perception of the local population of Russian immigrants – whether they are perceived as "immigrants" or "colonists." This framework helps to identify whether Russian expats are willing to assimilate into the Armenian culture eventually or,

characterized by their ex-colonialist status, see their culture as dominant and would follow the "cultural separatist" strategy suggested by Remennick described above.

As migration is an integral part of the world discourse, it has constantly been a trend coverage topic in news outlets. However, the percentage of coverage rises drastically at certain moments and for a particular period after important political and geopolitical events. A geopolitical event happening last year – the Russian-Ukrainian war – caused significant waves of migration to Armenia.

However, if the most common types of reporting, such as hard news, reviews, and analysis pieces, efficiently reflect on the economic and political changes migration causes, it is difficult to analyze the cultural transformations following these reporting formats due to the lack of possibility of in-depth individual case studies. Literary journalism, in this sense, as argued in the article *Literary Journalism: Conceptual Review, History and New Perspectives* by Monica Martinez “reinforce[s] the connection of Communications with other fields of knowledge, such as Sociology, Anthropology, and Psychology” (2017, p. 21). Therefore, the format of the literary journalism article provides a better possibility for case studies of particular representatives of immigrants and local Armenians. Supported by the research on immigrant and hosting society’s behaviors and previous cases of immigrant integrations in the new environment, a literary journalism piece will provide a strong overview of the current condition of Armenian-immigrant relationships.

Research questions

The main question the research aims to answer is the following:

How do Russian immigrants, who migrated after February 2022, influence the development of the cultural sphere of Armenia?

Additional research questions I have are:

How does the integration process of Russian immigrants happen in Armenia?

What issues do Russian immigrants face integrating into Armenian society?

Does the historical background of Russia and Armenia, as well as cultural differences, influence the integration process of Russian immigrants?

For this concern, it is to be noted that the research's approach does not simplify the process of cultural development, limiting it solely to the phenomenon of immigration. Using a specific example of Russian immigrants, the research rather aims to analyze immigration as a part of a more complex, general process of cultural development. It analyzes the processes that influence the development of the hosting country's cultural sphere – music, visual art, literature, performative art.

Methodology

This capstone research is designed by implementing a qualitative research method. The most effective way to investigate Russian immigrants' influence on the cultural sphere of Armenia was to explore the lived experiences of the immigrants in Armenia, their work, and their contribution to the specific branches of Armenia's cultural sphere. By delving into the unique experiences of Russian immigrants involved in various culture-related activities, the research aims to overview a broader picture of how the recent influx of Russian immigrants after February 2022 impacts the Armenian cultural sphere.

The research is based on in-depth face-to-face interviews with three representatives of Russian immigrants that came to Armenia after February 2022 and contributed to different areas of Armenian culture: StandUp culture, education and charity, entertainment and food culture. An auxiliary interview with the Head of the Migration Service of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure of Armenia provides necessary data and additional perspective on the integrational processes of the migrants and their influence on Armenia's cultural sphere.

The final product of the research is presented in the format of a literary journalism essay. The wide range of possibilities provided by the literary journalism writing, which is "factual journalistic writing that requires a depth of research and a literary skill that are not essential for ordinary, workmanlike, day-to-day reporting" (Mckay, 2009, p. 7), provides an environment for the research to broadly explore, analyze, and present the specificities of the case most efficiently.

Methods:

Interviews with immigrants:

The literary journalism format of the project, as well as the main research question focusing on the ways immigrants influence the cultural development of Armenia, emphasizes the importance of in-depth face-to-face interviews as a methodological tool for the research. The format of the interviews is offline, informal, and structured in order to scope the larger context of the discussion but still focus on the main direction of the research. The interviews are conducted with representatives of the immigrants. The interviewees are selected on the basis of their relation to the cultural sphere – visual art, music, and performative art (stand-up).

Based on the multiple theories of assimilation for immigrants, the interview questions examine the process of their integration into Armenian society to identify their willingness to

integrate into the new environment. The questions also touch upon their professional sphere to distinguish their abilities, desires, and motifs to influence the Armenian cultural sphere. As the cultural sphere is often divided into smaller communities, the questions also discuss the current conditions of the specific community the immigrant is becoming a part of.

Interview with a professional in the field of migration:

The interview with a professional in the field of migration is another tool the research uses. The offline face-to-face, formal, structured interview provides a theoretical basis for the processes that happen with the influx of immigrants. The format of the questions is primarily open-ended for the expert to provide a necessary overview and theoretical framework for further research.

Observations:

For the purposes of the literary journalism format of the project and to understand how the immigrants interact within their group and with the local population, I have used observations as a methodological tool. Several immigrant-held businesses in Yerevan attract both the immigrant population and the local Armenian population. The observations aim to analyze 1) the natural interaction between the consumers of the immigrant-held businesses; 2) the patterns of behavior distinctive for the immigrants and locals within the immigrant-held environment.

Interviewees overview:

As mentioned above, the research is based on four interviews, including three interviews with the representatives of Russian immigrants integrating into Armenia's cultural sphere and one with the Head of the Migration Service of Armenia.

All interviewees signed a consent form and agreed to disclose their identities in this research for educational purposes.

Garik Ogannisyan: a Russian-Armenian stand-up comedian, Garik was a member of StandUp Club #1, a Russian stand-up community based in Moscow. He immigrated to Armenia in February 2022 after the Russian-Ukrainian war started. At first, he performed in different local stand-up places. In June 2022, Garik, along with the Armenian stand-up comedians, opened Ari StandUp Club, the first stand-up club in Armenia. Ari StandUp Club, a platform for both local and foreign comedians, became an environment that is popularizing stand-up as a genre in Armenia.

Ilya Kusnirovich: creative director of “Esthetic Joy Embassy.” Previously, he worked as a commercial producer and event manager in Moscow. “Esthetic Joy Embassy” is a space – a bar, club, cafe, and every other category of gastronomical and entertainment space. It positions itself as a place for people to meet. “Esthetic Joy Embassy” tries to incorporate a modern hang-out space into traditional Armenian culture with local food and places to play chess and backgammon.

Viktoriya Vyakhoreva: a journalist and a co-founder of “Hume Organization”. “Hume” is an educational and charity organization. It organizes educational events targeted mostly at Russian immigrants to familiarize them with Armenian culture. It also organizes charity events to raise funds and help local charity organizations. Viktoria previously worked as a journalist and, later, in Konstantin Khabenskiy’s Charity Fund in Moscow.

The subsequent process included transcription and analysis of the themes raised in the interviews. After finding and analyzing the themes, the final step was to write a narrative

journalism article that, built upon the interviewees' experiences, provides an overview of the integration process and cultural influence of Russian immigrants in Armenia.

Dr. Armen Ghazaryan: Dr. Ghazaryan is the Head of the Migration Service of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure. In addition, he works as an adjunct professor at the American University of Armenia. Dr. Ghazaryan's professional and academic experience provides an essential theoretical background to the project's research field.

Statement of purpose

The starting point of this research was war. When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, thousands of Russians, who did not support the Russian government's actions, left their country. Many came to Armenia and brought their backgrounds and ideas with them. As a part of the integration process, Russian immigrants were willing to incorporate those ideas here in Armenia.

In the last year, various noticeable places founded by Russian immigrants opened in Yerevan. The places target the immigrant communities and the local population, bringing the people together and eliminating the communication barriers. They work with local charities and artists, host lectures and talks, educate people, and influence the development of the cultural sphere in Armenia. Three of them are the primary subjects of this research – “Esthetic Joy Embassy,” “Ari” Stand Up club, and “Hume” charity organization. The research study looks at the history of the establishment of these businesses and the experiences of their founders – why they settled in Armenia, how they integrated into the new environment, and how they operate in it.

The project's medium is a narrative journalism article. The choice of the medium was conditional upon two specific reasons. First, the issue was timely and relevant in the context of the processes currently happening in Armenia, which is not only suitable but essential for the journalistic piece. Second, the non-fiction narrative format provides the necessary freedom of elaboration on the issue.

The project does not aim to assess the matters of the Russian-Ukrainian war; instead, it focuses on the people who were forced to leave their homes and brought tangible input to the place they chose as a new residency. The research is about people, their stories, and what it is like to start it all over again in a new place, having the desire to create and share it with everyone around.

Reflections on process

The idea of this research study was necessitated by the time and the processes that Armenia and the entire region have undergone in the last year. As the format of the final product of this research is a literary journalism article, the topic should have been timely and relevant. When the Russian-Ukrainian war started, thousands of people from both countries were forced to leave their homes and relocate. Yerevan became a place where people, mostly Russians, were re-establishing their lives, integrating into a new community, opening new places, and engaging in the local culture. These integrative processes seemed to be an essential topic for the research.

Many businesses that Russian immigrants opened were culture-related. Bars and restaurants, entertaining spaces and educational lectures – the newcomers were initiating activities to help themselves and people like them integrate smoothly into the new environment. Hence, the research aimed to understand how these businesses influence the corresponding

spheres of culture. Do they change the culture? If so, then how? Is this influence positive necessarily? How does the local environment respond to these changes? These questions became the basis of the research.

These processes have their own issues and complications, such as the general problems the immigrants face during the integration process due to the differences in lifestyles and specificities of the new place, the language barrier, or the squabbles with the locals. This research aimed to find whether the issues are relevant for the Russian immigrants in Armenia and to better understand the possible reasons for them.

Three businesses chosen as the research's primary subjects represent different branches of the cultural sphere. "Ari" Stand Up club represents the entertainment/performative arts, "Esthetic Joy Embassy" represents a bar/club/entertainment culture, and "Hume" – charity and education. The interviewees also have different backgrounds and different stories of integration. Garik Ogannisyan is a Russian-Armenian who had never been to Armenia before March 2022. Viktoriya Vyakhoreva and Ilya Kusnirovich are Russians who arrived in Armenia after the war with Ukraine started and decided to start a business here. The interviewees' experiences gave the research a basis for analyzing the integration processes and interaction between the local population and the immigrants. A subsequent interview with Dr. Ghazaryan gave the research the perspective of a government official who worked with and conducted studies on immigrants.

The analysis of the interviews identified five major topics relevant to Russian immigrants in Armenia:

- **Migration:** Why did the Russians leave Russia? Why did they come to Armenia?

Was Armenia prepared for such a great influx of people?

- **Russia and Armenia:** Relations between the two countries – differences, similarities, and everything that follows.
- **Integration:** Difficulties with integration – Who? What? Why? And how to deal?
- **Business:** How do culture-related businesses the immigrants open operate? What do they bring to Armenia?
- **Culture:** How do the immigrants influence Armenia’s cultural sphere? What do they bring? How does it influence them?

The final product of this research is a literary journalism article. The non-fiction narrative, building around these five themes, overviews the experiences of the Russian immigrants in Armenia, the issues they faced with the integration, the businesses they created, and their effect on Armenia’s cultural sphere.

Creative piece

Mama, I'm an Immigrant

by Elene Muradian

May 20, 2023

I am sitting, drinking coffee, in a tiny outdoor cafe. Some year and a half ago, it would be easy to find a spot in any local cafe, especially during workdays, like today. Now, though, there's barely a vacant table somewhere far inside a cafe, especially on Saryan or Pushkin streets. However, today I was lucky to come to a less popular place founded by an Australian-Armenian. I did not know the place existed – it is hidden on a narrow street in Kentron, a central area of Yerevan. My today's interviewee invited me to talk here. The place has a couple of tables inside and a couple more outside the cafe. The owner vividly discusses something in the background and treats us with some pizza-looking authentic dish that we necessarily should try along with feta cheese.

My interviewee is Viktoriya Vyakhoreva, a young, delicate woman, quite dynamic and cheerful. She, just like thousands of Russian citizens after the war between Russia and Ukraine started, came to Armenia in March 2022. Before packing her life in a suitcase and bringing it to Yerevan, Viktoriya lived in Moscow and worked in charity for the last five years at Konstantin Khabenski's foundation. The foundation worked with children with brain tumors and tried to develop this sphere of Russian public healthcare. However, the foundation “never took money from the government,” Viktoriya highlights. “Hence, on the one hand, we did a large-scale job; on the other hand, there was an illusion that we don't interact with the government.” After the war started, and it became apparent that it would not be possible to work and keep their finances safe in the territory of Russia, Viktoriya, along with her boyfriend, moved to Yerevan.

In 2022, “the border crossing seldom was plus 65,000, which is extremely significant for us,” notes Dr. Armen Ghazaryan, the Head of the Migration Service of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure. The border crossing seldom is number of people crossing the Armenian border, and in 2022, the number of Russian citizens arriving in Zvartnots was striking. These 65,000 “doesn't mean that there are 65,000 Russians [in Armenia]; there might be more,” notes Dr. Ghazaryan, and it certainly, is. In the last year, Armenia has become one of the centers of migration in the region. And today, walking down the streets of Yerevan, you will probably hear an equal amount of Russian and Armenian conversations.

Such a significant influx of people from a different country and a different context inevitably brings changes to a place these people choose as their new home. According to The World Bank, the economic [changes](#) the Russian immigrants brought to Armenia are rather positive. The majority of the newcomers came with their own jobs. Hence, it “was not a big economic burden on the country,” notes Dr. Ghazaryan. On the contrary, the inflow of people, businesses and capital after the war in Ukraine started “fueled domestic demand and led to an appreciation of the currency.” However, when it comes to personal relations, things get more complicated.

Witnessing the processes happening in Armenia after she arrived, Viktoriya saw “the social issue,” the discord between the local population and the newcomers. She saw that the Russian immigrants treated

Armenia, its culture and history “quite disparagingly, sometimes arrogantly, sometimes superficially.” To somehow contribute and make the integration process of Russian immigrants in Armenia smoother, Viktoriya, with a small team, came up with an initiative they called [Hume](#). Hume is a charity / educational organization that holds events – lectures, public talks and workshops – about Armenia for Russian immigrants and beyond.

The idea of Hume came to Viktoriya and her co-founder in the most Yerevan way possible – “We were just drinking wine in InVino,” says Viktoriya, bursting out laughing. They believed that the misunderstanding of the country that Russian immigrants appeared in could lead to unintentional damage to both the immigrants and the local community. “The damage can happen when one thinks their culture is somehow dominant,” says Viktoriya. “In the case of people from Russia, it can be even not linked to their true beliefs. They grew up in such an environment. Russia is quite xenophobic.” Hume aims to eliminate this misconception and prevent the damage, and they do so through education. Hume gathered a pool of experts specializing in the most relevant topics regarding Armenia’s history, politics and culture, such as the Armenian Genocide, the Artsakh War, and the relationships between Armenia and Russia and Armenia and America. They conduct discussions with Armenian writers and hold lectures about Armenian female artists. Though another essential aspect of Hume’s operation is charity.

For now, Hume has organized two major charity events in favor of the [4090 Foundation](#). When Viktoriya was considering the organizations to work with, she intentionally avoided the ones raising funds for direct military purposes. “We understood that the folks who relocated won’t donate for the weapons, even if it’s the weapons for the Armenian side,” says Viktoriya. “Because they are against war.” Then, they learned about 4090, the foundation that works on improving the quality of life of soldiers who fought in Artsakh, and that was the match. Hume initiated fundraising and a charity concert of a neoclassical musician, Nikola Melnikov, and a violoncellist, Gago Mikichyan. For the concert, the 4090 Foundation invited the wards of the fund, those people who once served and now get the support and education provided by 4090. The cumulative amount of funds raised during these two events was around 3,000,000 AMD.

Though besides the educational and charity achievements, Hume also creates an environment for people to meet and engage, making the integration process for the immigrants easier. The events are mainly targeted at immigrants. As the events are primarily educational, the ordinary Armenian is most probably familiar with the topics discussed. However, some lectures attract the Armenian population as well. Several non-Russian-speaking Armenians were at the lecture held in English by Eric Hacopian, a journalist and a writer in [Civilnet](#). Thus, Hume creates an environment where Armenians and Russians with similar views can meet, interact and break interpersonal barriers.

The need for a certain rallying point became tangible for the immigrants in Armenia, and in search of those points, they “started to engage themselves into integrating into local society,” says Dr. Ghazaryan. One such point, or as Ilya Kusnirovich, the creative director of the place, calls it, the “intermediate stage of the accelerated assimilation,” is the Esthetic Joy Embassy (EJE). It is complicated to describe what EJE essentially is. It is a bar, a club, a summer terrace with a big garden with a pulpulak in it. It is a place for chess and backgammon tournaments, as well as a place for vogue ball events and local markets. EJE is an environment – the environment for people to meet and the “point of entry into Yerevan” for the immigrants. Though, the beginning of the EJE was not so rosy.

Right before the opening, EJE gave an interview to a Russian media outlet, “[The Blueprint](#).” The article was welcomed negatively both by the Russian and Armenian audiences. In a nutshell, the content of the interview sounded problematic, including seemingly ambiguous statements regarding Ukraine and seemingly arrogant expressions regarding the entertainment culture in Armenia. “Well, we fucked up at the beginning a little,” says Ilya, explaining the misconception that happened as a consequence of the interview. “In fact, we discussed that moment in detail,” recalls Ilya. “That we went away from the war, that we don’t support it,” but The Blueprint’s editorial policy “did not allow neither us nor them to fully elaborate on the question.”

“What are you doing now to avoid similar situations?” I ask, eager to know how such a popular spot had such an unpleasant beginning.

“We just don’t give interviews anymore,” says Ilya, laughing. “Nobody takes interviews with us anymore; all the outlets are closed.”

In fact, EJE picked a practical and effective resolving strategy – they systematically work and support the foundations that seem important to them. Recently, they worked with [Pink Armenia Foundation](#), which supports the LGBTQ+ community in Armenia. “We just try to create a certain safe zone” for the people to actually believe in the intentions to contribute that drive EJE.

EJE is not fixated on the Russian immigrant community in Yerevan. Their goal is to expand the social circle, attracting the local population. “We, indeed, have our relatively sizable audience in Russia,” recalls Ilya. “We, of course, counted that it will join to what we do in Armenia, but we certainly did not plan to confine ourselves to it.” That’s why EJE builds communication in English and Armenian specifically, to integrate and attract the locals. As for now, 60% of EJE’s audience is Russian-speaking, but the rest 40% are Armenians from Armenia and beyond.

Building an environment that includes the local population is crucial for EJE’s identity. The Embassy’s core notion is a built-in view of the local specificities. “The concept of EJE, initially, implies the format that it is not universal,” says Ilya. A part of EJE’s “thing” was, as Ilya called it, the “know-who approach.” They collaborate with the people and environment they become a part of, incorporating it into their business. Thus, Armenian EJE and EJE opened somewhere in Israel, for instance, would never be the same space in terms of the atmosphere, aesthetic and mood, even though it would deliver the core ideological message of the place for every citizen of the world.

The process of integration for Russians in Armenia, in general, is not unilateral. Organizing their own environment, the immigrants are “trying to integrate the locals as well to have some kind of exposure to the local culture.” Hence, integrating into Armenian society, they create a unique space and now incorporate the locals into it. I am walking down a street to another one of such places, carrying a big box of ponchiks from a small shop on Saryan – the best ponchiks you find in Yerevan.

I have been in that place before, but never during the day. Before the opening hours, the space looks weird. The stage is not lightened, the white chairs that usually are neatly placed around circular tables are

piled by the wall and the guys, who usually occupy the center of the stage, lightened up by the stage light, are sitting on a huge black wooden construction, some kind of a three-step bench that, oddly enough, fits into the atmosphere of the place perfectly. The place is “Ari” StandUp Club, the first stand-up club in Yerevan.

Garik Ogannisyan, stand-up comedian and the founder of “Ari,” is Russian-Armenian. In Moscow, he was a member of the StandUp Club #1 community. When the war started, he came to Armenia and decided to open a space for immigrant and local comedians to perform. “I wanted here to become a certain point, a certain center of the freedom of speech,” says Garik, as lately, the humor in Russia has become rather “refined.”

“Ari” became a space where Russian comedians could speak about politics, the condition of their homeland and the war with no fear of consequences. But, also, “Ari” became a spot where local comedians have found their voice. The first show that appeared on “Ari’s” [YouTube channel](#) was “Local StandUp,” the show where Armenian comedians share their stories in Armenian. “We decided that it would be fair if in Armenia we release stand-up in Armenian [first],” says Garik. Especially that Armenian comedians did not have a platform to show their work until now.

Though independent and available stand-up is a new phenomenon in Armenia, the comedians faced a contradictory reaction to their content posted online. “People get offended by literally anything,” says Garik. “Starting from the absolutely harmless jokes about Mesrop Mashtots. They say we don’t have a right to even say his name.” The Armenian audience is sensitive toward religious or moral matters and accepts unconventional humor without enthusiasm. Though, Garik believes it is just a stage, “an inevitable stage of acceptance of such a new occurrence.” Humor, as Garik believes, can become a liberating force. “We want to add a little bit of progressiveness to this society,” he says.

For now, the variation of the audience is uneven. Some concerts gather mostly the local population, and some consist of the Russian audience only. The issue lies in the novelty of the format, but it develops rapidly. The fact that a large part of the population of Armenia speaks Russian allows more and more people to engage in the environment formed in “Ari.” However, the strive of “Ari” to produce more content in Armenian has an important influence on the development of the sphere and on the Armenian population. “Ari” shows that the independent stand-up can be communicated in Armenian, that it is normal to joke about the issues of Armenia, reflect upon them and, thus, contribute to resolving the problems.

The specificities of Armenian culture are the matter of difficulty and the matter of inspiration for the immigrants. The immigrants come mainly from the “big urban culture,” as Dr. Ghazaryan puts it, and have to adjust to a slightly different lifestyle. “There is a certain difference in the work format we had in Moscow and here,” says Ilya. “The speed, in general, the speed of decision making. It is a slightly different lifestyle, a slightly different speed of doing things.” However, it was instead an intriguing aspect for the immigrants. The network formed thanks to the Armenian Diaspora is “fantastic,” recalls Viktoriya. “You can reach any person just because your last name also ends with ‘yan,’” she says. “That’s incredible!”

The influx of new businesses to Armenia created, as Ilya called it, “a little competition” that is crucial for the country’s free market and economic development. Each business got inspired by the existing environment of the corresponding sphere. “Hume” and “Ari” found an issue, a niche that was empty and needed someone to fill it. EJE found inspiration in “Simona” and “Mirzoyan Library,” the places of attraction for Yerevantsis for a long time already. Thus, Armenia, with its diverse culture, lets the people of a different country, different context, different lifestyle and different outlook on life find a passion for creating, for contributing,

for *living*.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Generic Consent Forms

CONSENT FORM

Consent to participate in a capstone project conducted at the American University of Armenia (AUA). This is to state that I agree to participate in the capstone project conducted by Elene Muradian. The capstone director is Dr. Hourig Attarian of the College of Humanities & Social Sciences at AUA (tel.: 060 612769, email: hourig.attarian@aua.am).

PURPOSE: I have been informed that the purpose of the project is to research the influence Russian immigrants and Russian-Armenian repatriates have on the development of the cultural sphere in Armenian. Within the bigger context of the project, the interview conducted by Elene Muradian is meant to focus on the experience of Russian immigrants and Russian-Armenian repatriates in Armenia and their impact on the Armenian cultural sphere.

PROCEDURES: I understand that the interview will be conducted in participants' homes or another appropriate place, and might be recorded on video. Alternatively, the interview may be conducted on Zoom or another online platform. As a participant, I will be asked to explore the experience of Russian immigrants and Russian-Armenian repatriates in Armenia and their impact on the Armenian cultural sphere. The interview will last from one to two hours, however, as a participant I am free to stop at any time, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the project at any given point. I understand that if I wish to extend the interview for more than two hours, I will be provided that opportunity.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: I understand that the interview involves the sharing of my personal views and opinions, which will be treated with the utmost care and consideration. I have been informed that I am free to stop, take a break or discontinue at any time. There are no risks involved in partaking in this interview.

CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION: As a participant, I will have access to all the recorded material for verification purposes. Throughout the project, if and when the material produced is in Armenian, I will have the opportunity to review and verify the English translations.

___ I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences.

___ I understand that the data from this project may be published in print or digital format for academic purposes.

In terms of **identification and reproduction** of my participation:

___ I agree to **disclose my identity**. I understand that my identity may be revealed in any publications or presentations that may result from this interview.

___ I agree to the reproduction of sound and images from this interview by any method and in any media for academic purposes (which may include webpages, documentary clips, etc.)

OR

___ I understand that my participation in this study is **confidential**. My identity will be concealed. I will be given a pseudonym in any publications or presentations that may result from this

interview. ___ I agree that while data from my interview may be published, no sound or images from it may be reproduced.

When photographs, artifacts or documents are scanned or photographed:

___ I agree to let the student researcher copy family photographs and documents for use in the student project.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

INTERVIEWEE:

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____

INTERVIEWER:

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a capstone project participant, please contact Dr. Hourig Attarian of the College of Humanities & Social Sciences at AUA (tel.: 060 612769, email: hourig.attarian@aua.am).

БЛАНК СОГЛАСИЯ

Согласие на участие в дипломном проекте, проводимом в Американском университете Армении (АУА). Этим я подтверждаю, что я согласен участвовать в дипломном проекте, проводимом Элене Мурадян. Дипломным руководителем является доктор Хуриг Аттарян, колледж гуманитарных и социальных наук АУА (тел.: 060 612769, электронная почта: hourig.attarian@aua.am).

ЦЕЛЬ: Мне сообщили, что целью проекта является исследование влияния русских иммигрантов и русско-армянских репатриантов на развитие культурной сферы Армении. В более широком контексте проекта, интервью, проведенное Элене Мурадян, должно быть сосредоточено на моем личном опыте миграции, жизни и работе в Армении за последний год.

ПРОЦЕДУРЫ: Я понимаю, что интервью будет проводиться дома у участников или в другом подходящем месте и может быть записано на видео. В качестве альтернативы интервью может быть проведено в Zoom или другой онлайн-платформе. Меня как участника попросят обсудить мой личный опыт миграции, жизни и работы в Армении. Интервью продлится от одного до двух часов, однако как участник я волен остановиться в любой момент, отказаться отвечать на любые вопросы или выйти из проекта в любой

момент. Я понимаю, что если я захочу продлить интервью более чем на два часа, мне будет предоставлена такая возможность.

РИСКИ И ПРЕИМУЩЕСТВА: Я понимаю, что интервью включает в себя обмен моими личными взглядами и мнениями, которые будут рассмотрены с максимальной осторожностью и вниманием. Мне сообщили, что я могу остановиться, сделать перерыв или прекратить интервью в любое время. Участие в этом интервью не сопряжено с риском.

УСЛОВИЯ УЧАСТИЯ: Как участник, я буду иметь доступ ко всем записанным материалам в целях проверки. На протяжении всего проекта, если и когда материал будет на армянском языке, у меня будет возможность просматривать и проверять русские переводы.

Я понимаю, что могу отозвать свое согласие и прекратить свое участие в любое время без негативных последствий.

Я понимаю, что данные этого проекта могут быть опубликованы в печатном или цифровом формате в научных целях.

В части **идентификации и воспроизведения** моего участия:

Я согласен **раскрыть свою личность**. Я понимаю, что моя личность может быть раскрыта в любых публикациях или презентациях, которые могут быть результатом этого интервью.

Я даю согласие на воспроизведение звука и изображений из этого интервью любым способом и на любом носителе в академических целях (включая веб-страницы, документальные клипы и т. д.)

ИЛИ

Я понимаю, что мое участие в этом исследовании является **конфиденциальным**. Моя личность будет скрыта. Мне будет дан псевдоним в любых публикациях или презентациях, которые могут быть результатом этого интервью.

Я согласен с тем, что хотя данные моего интервью могут быть опубликованы, никакие звуки или изображения из него не могут быть воспроизведены.

Когда фотографии, артефакты или документы сканируются или фотографируются:

Я разрешаю студенту-исследователю копировать семейные фотографии и документы для использования в студенческом проекте.

Я ВНИМАТЕЛЬНО ИЗУЧИЛ ИЗЛОЖЕННОЕ ВЫШЕ И ПОНИМАЮ НАСТОЯЩЕЕ СОГЛАШЕНИЕ. Я СВОБОДНО И ДОБРОВОЛЬНО СОГЛАШАЮСЬ УЧАСТВОВАТЬ В ЭТОМ ИССЛЕДОВАНИИ.

ИНТЕРВЬЮИРУЕМЫЙ:

ИМЯ (просьба печатать) _____

ДАТА ПОДПИСАНИЯ _____

ИНТЕРВЬЮЕР:

ИМЯ (просьба печатать) _____

ДАТА ПОДПИСАНИЯ _____

Если в любое время у вас возникнут вопросы о ваших правах в качестве участника дипломного проекта, пожалуйста, свяжитесь с доктором Хоуриг Аттарян из колледжа гуманитарных и социальных наук в АУА (тел.: 060 612769, электронная почта: hourig.attarian@aua.am).

Appendix B: Interview Guidelines – Dr. Armen Ghazaryan

Migration and Armenia

1. Statistics show that as for 2011, more than 98% of the population in Armenia were Armenians. Hence, it seems like Armenia is a very homogeneous country and was not a center of attraction for immigrants until recently. How does Armenia handle this new condition? Were we, as a country, prepared for so many newcomers?
2. Are you monitoring the current situation? Have you conducted any studies to see how Armenians accept this wave of people?
3. Are there differences in the way Armenians treat immigrants in Yerevan and the rest of the country?

Russia's Background

1. In one of the papers I read, preparing, the author makes the distinction between the terms “colonists” and “immigrants” referring to Russians, due to the complexity of historical and geopolitical background. The paper was written in 2005. Hence, it talks mostly about the 90s and early 2000s. Referring to the historical events or maybe some specific cases you can recall, do Russian immigrants tend to behave in a way inherent to the “superior” or “more important” nation?
2. Might Armenians today, as a post-Soviet nation, have a tendency of perceiving Russian immigrants as “colonists?”

Immigrants and Culture

1. Do you have any statistics about how many people have come in the past year?

2. Have you conducted any study that will allow you to form a “portrait” of people that have come here? Who is a typical immigrant that came to Armenia in 2022? Are people still coming?
3. Are there any specific patterns of behavior inherent to Russian immigrants? In what ways are they different from locals? What are the typical difficulties they face trying to fit in Armenian society?
4. Do you conduct any work helping the immigrants to integrate into Armenian society?
5. What do you think they are contributing to Armenia in terms of culture? Do you think these contributions they bring will end up being incorporated into Armenian culture?
6. What were the lessons the gov. learned during this period?

Appendix C: Interview Guidelines – Garik Ogannisyan

Introduction

1. When did you come to Armenia and why?
2. Why Armenia specifically? Were there any other options?
3. Was the process of settling down here hard? Could you recall it? What was the hardest part?
4. Was there a time you regretted your decision to move? Why yes or why no?
5. When you were planning to migrate, what was your vision of your life in the new place? Were you planning to open a stand up club here or did the idea come later?

Ari Stand Up Club

1. How did you come up with the idea to open a stand up club here? Was it entirely your initiative, or did the locals give you this idea?
2. Could you describe the process, when you came up with the idea to open the club? (Maybe the day you realized you want to do it, or something that pushed you to do it).
3. Did you know any local (i.e. Armenian) comedians when you lived in Russia?
4. Why did you think it was important to open one in Yerevan? Possible follow up: What about Van Gogh Cafe? It used to be, and currently it still is, a place for stand up in Yerevan.

Locals and Immigrants

1. Do locals attend the concerts at Ari? How often? Your audience consists mostly of locals or the immigrant population?
2. What about local comedians? How many of them perform here?
3. Do you think the number of Armenian comedians has increased since you opened Ari? Follow up: why yes or why no.
4. Ari’s YouTube channel: you don’t post a lot there, but the content that exists is in Armenian. Why don’t you post Russian-language content? Is there a reason behind it, or you’re planning to have the content in different languages?

Garik’s Background

1. You are an Armenian from Russia. You have never been in Armenia before Feb. 2022, right? Why?
2. How's your Armenian learning going?
3. Why did you decide to learn Armenian now only? Do your parents speak Armenian? Did they speak with you when you were a child?
4. What are you planning to do next?
5. It's been a year since you've come to Armenia. What changed in your life and in the life of Ari?

Appendix D: Interview Guidelines – Viktoriya Vyakhoreva

Viktoriya's Background

1. Расскажи немного о себе: чем ты занималась до переезда?
2. Как давно ты приехала в Армению и почему?
3. Почему именно Армения? Были ли другие варианты?
4. Был ли момент, когда ты пожалела о том, что переехала именно сюда? Почему?
5. Когда ты решила переезжать, как ты представляла свою жизнь здесь? (У тебя была важная работа в России, ты помогала людям, и в момент пришлось все оставить и ехать в никуда. Как это было?)
6. Как зародилась идея Хьюма? Вы уже в России решили, что будете делать здесь что-то подобное или уже после переезда?

Hume's Background

1. Расскажи подробнее процесс создания/запуска Хьюма.
2. Были ли у вас налажены контакты с местными благотворительными организациями/людьми из социальной сферы и сферы культуры, до того, как вы переехали, или вам пришлось выстраивать коммуникацию уже будучи в Армении?
3. У вас на сайте, в разделе контекст, где вы описываете, почему интеграция мигрантов так важна, написано: «Без понимания особенностей той страны, куда они приехали, мигранты из России могут не только не найти себе места в обществе, но и навредить местному сообществу.». Можешь привести пример, из своего опыта, когда мигранты из России приносили вред локальному сообществу? Почему так происходит?

Hume

1. С какими организациями вы работаете и на что направлены вырученные средства?
2. Ведете ли вы статистику посещаемости ваших мероприятий? Как много мигрантов приходит? Как много местных?
3. Сможешь ли ты составить некий «портрет», такой, немного обобщенный, мигрантов, которые приходят к вам на лекции/мероприятия? Кто эти люди? Почему они приехали в Армению? Собираются ли они оставаться в Армении и поэтому изучают культуру, либо это просто один из способов времяпровождения?

4. А «портрет» местных армян, которые приходят? Кто они?
5. Наблюдала ли ты, или, может быть, сталкивалась сама, с проблемами в коммуникации между местными и приезжими? В чем причина? Что, как ты считаешь, является главной причиной, мешающей мигрантам легко интегрироваться?
6. Ощущается ли разница культур? В чем?
7. Проводите ли вы лекции/мероприятия вне Еревана? Можешь описать отличие между Ереваном и другими городами?
8. Что для тебя самой было самое удивительное/необычное, с чем ты столкнулась в Армении?
9. Как ты оцениваешь ваше влияние на развитие сферы культуры в Армении? Что вы привнесли?
10. Как ты думаешь, вклад, который делает Хьюм – и образовательный, и благотворительный, и культурный – это временный феномен или он сможет укрепиться в Армении и изменит и мигрантов и Армянское общество?
11. Почему было важно открыть такую организацию как Хьюм?

What's next?

1. Что вы собираетесь делать дальше? Собираетесь ли оставаться жить в Армении и развивать Хьюм или есть какие-то другие планы?
2. Прошел год с того момента, как вы переехали и открыли Хьюм. Что изменилось (в вашей жизни, в жизни организации)?

Appendix E: Interview Guidelines – Пяа Kusnirovich

Пяа's Background

1. Расскажи немного о себе: чем ты занимался до переезда?
2. Как давно ты приехал в Армению и почему?
3. Почему именно Армения? Были ли другие варианты?
4. Был ли момент, когда ты пожалел о том, что переехал именно сюда? Почему?
5. Когда ты решил переезжать, как ты представлял свою жизнь здесь?
6. Как зародилась идея ПЭУ?

EJE's Background

1. Расскажи подробнее процесс создания и запуска ПЭУ.
2. Была ли у вас налажена коммуникация с местными или вам пришлось искать людей уже будучи в Армении?
3. Что было самое сложное в процессе открытия?
4. Как проходила коммуникация с местными в процессе открытия? Были ли сложные моменты?
5. Почему ПЭУ открылся именно сейчас и именно в Армении?

6. Изначально, вы планировали открыть ПЭУ в Тбилиси. Как Армения повлияла на то, каким ПЭУ стал в итоге? Это все то же место, которое вы задумывали изначально, или оно видоизменилось с учетом локальных специфик?

ЕЈЕ

1. Расскажи про ПЭУ так, как ты его видишь. ПЭУ – это...
2. Опишите вашу целевую аудиторию. Кто эти люди, которых привлекает ПЭУ?
3. В процентном соотношении (я понимаю, что вы вряд ли ведете статистику, но все же мнение человека, у которого есть инсайты), на сколько больше – и больше ли – посетителей приезжих? Это в большинстве своем мигранты? Много ли их из России? Как много местных?
4. Сталкивались ли вы с проблемами в коммуникации с местными на каком-либо этапе запуска ПЭУ или уже сейчас?
5. Перед тем как открыться, вы дали интервью The Blueprint, и хотя вы открыто выражали озабоченность о том, как вас могут видеть и воспринимать местные - о вашей «имперскости», не смотря на это, хейт фае равно был. Как ты думаешь, был ли он оправдан? Как ты смотришь на ту ситуацию сейчас, спустя практически год? Что вы делали и делаете для того, чтобы избежать подобных ситуаций сейчас?
6. Когда вы только собирались открыться, кто была ваша таргетная аудитория? Вы открывались с рассветом на мигрантов или на местных тоже?
7. Как ты думаешь, как ПЭУ влияет на сферу культуры в Армении? Что вы привнесли? Что изменили?

What's next?

1. Что вы собираетесь делать дальше?
2. Прошел год с того момента, как вы переехали и открыли ПЭУ. Что изменилось (в вашей жизни, в жизни организации)?