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**Native Tbilisians or Diaspora:
Negotiating the Status of Armenians in Tbilisi**

According to contemporary ethnographic studies on the Armenians of Tbilisi local Armenians by and large perceive themselves as natives of Tbilisi rather than a diaspora community (Mkrtchian 2009: 305; Vardanyan 2006: 97). The data I collected in Tbilisi also confirms that perpetuation of the narrative on “Armenian Tiflis” constitutes an important element of Armenian identity for a majority of research participants. During fieldwork conducted in Tbilisi in 2015–2016 I encountered another trend in self-perception and self-representation as a diaspora community that, as I argue in this article, is a contemporary phenomenon and has been gradually gaining momentum among some Armenians in Tbilisi in the recent years. I explore both the structure of these narratives and their possible sources, including actors within and outside of the Armenian community and the tensions between an Armenian minority and both the Armenian state on the one hand, and the Georgian society on the other that are both created and perpetuated by these competing narratives. The article is based on fieldwork materials, Armenian and Georgian media sources and scholarly works.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Armenia, Nationalism, Identity, Tbilisi.*

Էլլի Պոնոմարյովա

Սանկտ Պետերբուրգի եվրոպական համալսարան

**Բնիկ թիֆլիսցիներ, թե՛ Սփյուռք.
քննարկում թիֆլիսաբնակ հայերի կարգավիճակի շուրջ**

Ժամանակակից ազգագրական հետազոտությունները ցույց են տալիս, որ թիֆլիսահայերը հիմնականում իրենց ընկալում են որպես բնիկ թիֆլիսցի, այլ ոչ թե Սփյուռքի մի մաս (Mkrtchian 2009: 305; Vardanyan 2006: 97): Դաշտային աշխատանքի միջոցով Թբիլիսիում հավաքած մեր տվյալները նույնպես հաստատում են, որ «հայկական Թիֆլիսի» մասին նարատիվի անընդհատ կրկները ինֆորմանտների մեծամասնության համար կազմում է հայկական ինքնության կարևոր մի տարր: 2015–2016 թվականներին դաշտային աշխատանք անցկացնելու ընթացքում ես հայտնաբերել եմ ինքնահասկացման և ինքնաներկայացման ես մի միտում. թիֆլիսահայությունը՝ որպես սփյուռքահայ համայնք, որը, ինչպես ես փորձում եմ ապացուցել այս հոդվածում, ժամանակակից երևույթ է և տարածվել է թիֆլիսահայերի շրջանում վերջին տարիների ընթացքում: Հոդվածի նպատակն այս տարբեր ներկայացման ձևերի առաջացման պատճառների վերլուծությունն է: Վերլուծության ենթարկելով թիֆլիսահայերի դրության մասին մրցակցող նարատիվներից յուրաքանչյուրը՝ ես փորձում եմ գտնել նրանց նպատակները, պատմական արմատները, ինչպես նաև հայտնաբերել հայ փոքրամասնության և մի կողմից՝ հայկական պետության, իսկ մյուս կողմից՝ վրացական հասարակու-

թյան միջև առկա լարվածությունները, որոնք և՛ ստեղծվում են, և՛ տարածվում այդ մրցակցող նաքատիվների պատճառով: Հոդվածը պատրաստվել է դաշտային աշխատանքի նյութերի, հայկական և վրացական լրատվամիջոցների և գիտական աշխատանքների հիման վրա:

Բանալի բառեր. *Միջոցը, Հայաստան, ազգայնություն, ինքնություն, Թբիլիսի:*

Элли Пономарева

**Коренные тбилисцы или диаспора:
конкурирующие нарративы о статусе армян в Тбилиси**

Согласно современным антропологическим исследованиям, тифлисские армяне в основном воспринимают себя коренными тифлисцами, нежели частью армянской диаспоры. Но во время моих полевых исследований 2015–2016 г. проявилась еще одна тенденция самовосприятия и самовыражения – тифлисские армяне как часть диаспоры. В настоящей работе я попыталась доказать, что вышеупомянутая тенденция является современным феноменом и в последнее время становится все более актуальной среди некоторых тифлисских армян.

Introduction

According to ethnographic research on Armenians in Tbilisi local Armenians by and large identify themselves as “natives of Tbilisi” and view the city as their own (Mkrtchian 2009: 305; Vardanyan 2006: 97). The data I collected in Tbilisi confirms that perpetuation of the narrative on “Armenian Tiflis” constitutes an important element of Armenian identity for the majority of research participants. During fieldwork conducted in Tbilisi in 2015–2016 I encountered another trend in self-perception and self-representation as a diaspora community which, as I argue in this article, is a contemporary phenomenon and has been gradually gaining momentum among the Armenians in Tbilisi in the recent years. I explore both the structure of these narratives and their possible sources, including actors within and outside of the Armenian community.

Participant observation and interviews reveal that the image of Armenians in Tbilisi as members of the Armenian Diaspora has been repeatedly promoted among local Armenians by the clergy and church adjacent structures of the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia and partly by other local ethnic entrepreneurs. This trend had been previously addressed by the Armenian anthropologist Yulia Antonyan in a conference presentation in 2014¹. Antonyan argues that various actors including the Armenian Apostolic church and local activists are instrumentalizing the issue of “contested churches”² to mobilize local Armenians and increase

1 The presentation was delivered at the conference “Caucasus Connections” at Indiana University, Bloomington in April 2014. A video of the presentation entitled “Contesting the Religious Landscape: Social and Cultural Background of Discourses on ‘Georgianization’ of the Armenian Churches in Tbilisi” is available at: http://www.indiana.edu/~video/stream/launchflash.html?folder=video&filename=arisc_Antonyan.mp4.

2 The term “contested churches” is used in this context to refer to those churches in Tbilisi which are claimed both by the Armenian Apostolic and the Georgian Orthodox Churches.

their involvement with newly established diaspora-like organizations. She points out to new practices that are supposed to make the local Armenian community a part of “pan-Armenian processes”. As the presentation remains unpublished the author’s theoretical stance on what constitutes a diaspora community remains unknown to us since it was not mentioned at the conference. This issue needs to be addressed separately along with a detailed overview of the recent political and social changes which took place in Georgia. While the point made by Yulia Antonyan has been of high importance for my research in this article I argue that it is unjustified to speak of a unilateral transformation of Armenians in Tbilisi into a diasporic community. The diasporic discourse of the local elites often comes into collision with popular understandings of the status of Armenians in Tbilisi. Thus the relationship between the two competing narratives on Tbilisi Armenians as the city natives and as a diaspora community is not unproblematic since the emerging view of Tbilisi Armenians as diaspora is refuted by many local Armenians as counter to their interests.

The incipient narrative on Armenians in Tbilisi as a diaspora community appears to be largely stemming from the evolving diaspora policy of the Republic of Armenia which is based on the new understanding of the scope of the Armenian diaspora. Though to fully grasp how the status of Armenians in Tbilisi is being re-negotiated in the Post-Soviet Georgia I find it fruitful to employ Rogers Brubaker’s theoretical model of the triadic relational nexus linking national minorities, nationalizing states and external national homelands in my analysis (Brubaker 1995: 108-111). By examining each of the competing narratives on the status of Armenians in Tbilisi I attempt to uncover the purposes they serve, their historical roots and the tensions between an Armenian minority and both the Armenian state on the one hand, and the Georgian society on the other that are both created and perpetuated by these competing narratives. The article is based on fieldwork materials, Armenian and Georgian media sources and scholarly works.

Armenians in Tbilisi as “Accidental Diaspora”: Approaches to the Study of Diaspora Projects

Addressing the great political reconfigurations that took place after the breakup of the Soviet Union and other previously multinational political structures Rogers Brubaker describes the modern world as post-multinational and characterized by adjusting political space along the national lines (Brubaker 2005: 1). The newly established borders contribute to the creation of a mismatch between cultural and political boundaries with millions of people left outside of “their own” national territory, attached by formal citizenship to one state and by ethnocultural affinity to another (Brubaker 1995: 108). To refer to such populations Rogers Brubaker has coined a term “accidental diaspora” which is synonymous to the notion of “beached diaspora” introduced by David Laitin in his study on the Russian-speaking populations in the near abroad. Both scholars underscore that these diasporas are created

as a result of movement of borders rather than movement of people. (Brubaker 1995: 2; Laitin 1998: 29). To distinguish this type from other types of diasporas Brubaker introduces additional criteria: “accidental diasporas” crystallize suddenly following a dramatic reconfiguration of political space, they come into being without the participation and often against the will of their members, they tend to be more concentrated and territorially rooted (Brubaker 2005: 2).

The history of the Armenians in Tbilisi fits into the framework described above³. Still the applicability of the term “diaspora” to the context of this research requires further discussion. R. Brubaker himself criticizes the excessive use of the term “diaspora” in research produced in the 1990s and 2000s in various areas of study. He underscores that by endlessly expanding the boundaries of this term diaspora scholars weaken its analytical potential as a research tool (Brubaker 2005: 3). Relying on the work of the most renowned experts in the field of diaspora studies such as William Safran, James Clifford, Khachig Tölölyan, Robin Cohen, Gabriel Sheffer etc. R. Brubaker singles out the three elements a combination of which is present in most definitions of diaspora regardless of their semantic and conceptual diversity. These elements include dispersion, homeland orientation and boundary-maintenance. The latter means the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-à-vis the host society. R. Brubaker points out that the theorists of diaspora understand dispersion in two ways. In a more narrow sense dispersion in diaspora is caused by a traumatic event. In broader definitions it can be any dispersion that crosses the borders of a nation state regardless of its causes. Homeland orientation implies that the real or imagined homeland is treated as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty. Though R. Brubaker underscores that in the recent discussions on diaspora this criterion has lost its prior universal significance. He gives examples of diasporas for which the ability to recreate culture in diverse locations is of more importance than orientation to roots in a particular place. Boundary-maintenance can stem from deliberate resistance to assimilation through self-enforced endogamy and other forms of voluntary segregation; it also can be an unintended consequence of social exclusion from the host society. It should be noted that though boundary-maintenance is commonly emphasized there is a strong counter-current in diaspora studies emphasizing hybridity, fluidity and diversity experienced by its members (Ibid.: 5-7).

The criteria mentioned above characterize diaspora as an entity or in S. Vertovec’s terminology a social form. S. Vertovec points out that the term “diaspora” is employed to convey different meaning as well: Diaspora as a form of consciousness and diaspora as a mode of cultural production (Vertovec 1997). One of the important trends in critical reassessment of the phenomenon of diaspora is renouncing the essentialization of this term. Referencing S. Vertovec’s analysis of the three mean-

3 The formation of the Armenian population in Tbilisi and the role the Armenians played in the city will be addressed below.

ings of the term diaspora Martin Sökefeld writes that it is difficult to conceptually differentiate the notion of diaspora as a social form and as a form of consciousness (Sökefeld 2006: 265). To counter the essentialist definitions of diaspora according to which it can be described as a group with real boundaries and measured in quantitative terms Rogers Brubaker points out the need to overcome “groupism”. While the notion of diaspora helps us go beyond the metaphysics of the nation state as a territorially bounded community at the same time it may be employed to essentialize non-territorial belonging. For that reason R. Brubaker in his analysis of diaspora proposes to think of it not in substantialist terms as a bounded entity but as an idiom, a stance and a claim (Brubaker 2005: 12).

M. Sökefeld employs B. Anderson’s terminology and describes diaspora as a “transnational imagined community”. He underscores that while identities are often essentialized in political context such essentialized constructs should not be taken at face value by a researcher. Identities become politically effective only when they are accepted and supported by a certain number of people. Thus when studying diaspora as a political project it is important to investigate by whom and how diaspora identity is mobilized. Treating diaspora as an imagined community M. Sökefeld argues that the first two categories of meaning of diaspora introduced by S. Vertovec, namely diaspora as a social form and as a form of consciousness, are in fact inseparable. There can be no diaspora community without shared consciousness of diaspora. Because the category of consciousness is difficult to ascertain in an empirical study M. Sökefeld proposes to speak of diaspora discourses instead. According to M. Sökefeld consciousness has to be expressed through discourse in order to produce social and political effect (Sökefeld 2006: 266-267). Diaspora discourse can be produced both by those who consider themselves a part of the imagined community in question and by those who speak in their name. Some actors may fully engage in the process of discursive and social construction while others may passively embrace the image of the community or propose an alternative vision. Meanwhile some of those whom ethnic activists try to include into the diaspora project may actively distance themselves from it.

Thus in my research I treat the model of “accidental diaspora” as a macropolitical context that creates an opportunity for a diaspora project to develop. To establish the relevance of this model for the Armenian population of Tbilisi on the macro level it is necessary to turn to history and give an overview of the changes in political and social reality which took place after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Though to speak of construction of diaspora identity among the Armenians in Tbilisi we have to turn to microanalysis of everyday interaction, new discourses and practices disseminated by various ethnic institutions and activists and to the spectrum of reactions which these new developments provoke among the Armenians in Tbilisi.

Armenian Presence in Tbilisi in the Imperial, Menshevik and Soviet Periods

Existing research suggests that the Armenians have lived in Tbilisi since the Early Middle Ages⁴. Even though there is no precise data about the population of Tbilisi before the 19th century many travelers and historians mention the Armenians among other ethnic groups in Tbilisi; some even consider them the largest one in the city (Poliekvov and Natadze 1929: 15, 30-31). According to archival data at the beginning of the 19th century the Armenians constituted a majority of the city's population. The percentage of the Armenian population was dropping throughout the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries (Anchabadze, Volkova 1990: 29). Though the Armenians still remained a plurality compared to the other ethnic groups until the 1920s (K'akuria 1979: 159). The percentage of Armenians in the population of Tbilisi was decreasing during the Soviet period as well. This process intensified in the first years of Georgia's independence. According to the 2002 census, Armenians constituted only 7,6 % of the city's population (Mkrtchyan 2009: 3). The recent census of 2014 revealed that the Armenian population in Tbilisi at the moment constitutes 53 409 people⁵.

The majority of my Armenian informants were born in Tbilisi and several generations of their family have lived there. The Armenian population of Tbilisi is not homogenous in terms of migration history of their families. Research participants themselves normally divide the Armenian population of Tbilisi in two groups: those who lived in Tbilisi before 1915 – the so called Old tbilisians and the descendants of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide who came to Tbilisi after 1915⁶. Even taking this distinction into consideration the last sizeable wave of Armenian migration to Tbilisi thus took place before the Russian revolution and the formation of the Democratic Republic of Georgia and more than seven decades prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union. Naturally, the Armenians in Tbilisi including the descendants of the Genocide survivors do not see themselves as “immigrants”.

This feeling of indigeneity in the city that Armenians in Tbilisi maintain to this day relies on the collective memory of the role Armenians played in urban life for centuries. To Georgians Tbilisi has been their political center since the early Middle Ages. But despite the fact that the rulers of the country were Georgian, at the local level Georgian towns were dominated by Armenian merchants (Sunny 2009: 17-18).

4 Nikolay Berzenov writes relying on the tales of the foundation of Tbilisi that king Vakhtang Gorgasali invited Armenian merchants and craftsmen to Tbilisi in the 5th century (Berzenov 1870: 87-88). Other researchers note that the Armenians were first invited to Tbilisi by King David the Builder (1073-1125) (Anchabadze and Volkova 1990: 245; Chkhetaia 1958: 161; Maisuradze 1999: 60).

5 2014 General Population Census Results: Total population by regions and ethnicity. Electronic resource: <http://census.ge/en/results/census>. Last accessed on May 31, 2016.

6 Fieldwork materials. Tbilisi, 2015.

With the annexation of Georgia and later the entire Transcaucasia by the Russian Empire in the early 19th century the Armenians in Tbilisi acquired greater physical security: They were now protected both from Muslim invasions and abuse at the hands of Georgian nobles. These favorable conditions allowed the Armenian elites to improve their status in society and gain control of Tiflis' municipal government. The annexation of Transcaucasia brought another important change: The region was divided up into governorships (*gubernia*) that were not directly associated with a particular nationality. Thus the geographic categories of "Georgia" and "Armenia" did not exist in Russian Imperial administration (Blauvelt and Berglund 2016: 70). Ronald Suny indicates that as the regional center in Transcaucasia Tbilisi became the intellectual and political center not only for the Georgians but for the Caucasian Armenians and, to a lesser extent, the Azerbaijanis as well. Tbilisi played a significant role in the formation of the Armenian national movement in the Russian Empire. Later the importance of Tbilisi in the Armenian national narrative was downplayed by Soviet and Post-Soviet Armenian historians in order to emphasize the role of Armenia's current capital – Yerevan (Suny 2009: 18-19). Thus if we rely on the above-mentioned criteria that characterize a diasporic community Armenians living in Tbilisi in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century should not be treated as diaspora. At that time Tbilisi was one of the regional centers of a multiethnic empire and Armenians were not separated from the territory considered their historical homeland, at least its Eastern part, by state borders. Moreover the notion of what constitutes the center towards which the Armenians are supposed to gravitate was shaped later in the brief existence of the First Republic of Armenia, throughout the Soviet period and subsequent independence.

The collapse of the Russian Empire brought major changes into the lives of Armenians in Tbilisi. The short-lived Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic formed in February 1918 fell apart a few months later and the Georgian Democratic Republic led by the Mensheviks was established. Because of the mutual territorial claims between the rising Georgian and Armenian nation states Armenians in Tbilisi were treated as potential enemies by the authorities. Armenians lost their erstwhile influence in the city: the Dashnak leaders were arrested and Armenian property expropriated. Many prominent Tbilisi Armenians emigrated to Yerevan (Blauvelt and Berglund 2016: 73-74). Armenians were now portrayed by the Georgian nationalists as outsiders whose loyalties lied with the Armenian authorities in Yerevan. The nationalist rhetoric deployed in this period to discredit the Armenians resurfaced in the 1990s when Georgia regained independence.

After a short period of nation state building which took place in 1918-1921 Armenians in Tbilisi yet again found themselves in a multiethnic empire – the Soviet Union. In the Soviet period Armenians living outside of their "putative homeland", the Armenian Republic, were not seen as a part of *spyurq* – the term used to describe the Armenian diaspora. Levon Abrahamyan comments on the peculiarities of this

term: «As a rule, Armenian scholars use the word *spyurq*, the Armenian equivalent of the Greek word diaspora only in reference to that part of diaspora (indeed the largest in number) that was formed as a result of the Genocide of 1915» (Abrahamian 2005: 143). Therefore the Armenian communities that existed in the Russian empire and later in the Soviet Union were not covered by this term. The encyclopedia «Armenian diaspora» explains this phenomenon in the following way: «It is noteworthy that under the Soviet rule the term *spyurq* was never applied to those Armenians living within the USSR but outside of Soviet Armenia neither in official, nor in academic publications. This ideologically driven approach was explained by the fact that Armenians (including those living in Soviet Armenia) as citizens of the Soviet Union who enjoyed full rights were an integral part of the ‘new historical entity’ – the Soviet people» (Melkonyan 2003: 12). This quote from a scholarly work produced in Post-Soviet Armenia is in itself indicative of the changing view on the boundaries of the Armenian diaspora which will be addressed below. According to Razmik Panossian though the notion of “internal” diaspora applied to Armenians living in the same overarching state as Soviet Armenia did exist, before 1991 when Armenians spoke of diaspora the term referred to Armenians who lived outside of the Soviet Union (Panossian 2003: 142).

Under the Soviet rule no real Armenian community life existed throughout the Soviet Republics and all the Armenian institutions in Georgia, such as Armenian schools, newspapers, theater etc. were state-funded and state-controlled. Most of these institutions were established during the Soviet period and functioned in line with the Soviet nationality policy (Hin 2003: 77). During interviews a number of Armenians in Tbilisi underscored that spatial proximity, absence of borders and maintenance of close familial ties with relatives in Armenia established through marriage and internal migration of Armenians between Georgia and Armenia made them feel that “*Georgia was a continuation of Armenia*”⁷. They did not see themselves as separated from their “putative homeland”. Research participants often mentioned that they treated the Soviet Union as a whole as their homeland.

The Armenian Minority Facing New Political Realities in Post-Soviet Georgia

After Georgia’s independence Armenians in Tbilisi found themselves in a rapidly nationalizing state. Since then the process of renegotiation of the Armenians’ status in Georgia involving the Georgian state, the Armenian minority and the Armenian state has begun. As Gia Nodia points out, since 1988 the Georgian media has presented the issue of Georgian nationhood in predominantly ethnic terms and the minorities have been routinely referred to as “guests on our soil” (Nodia 1996: 73-89). J. Hin writes that in Eduard Shevarnadze’s time while the new political leaders perceived the ethnic concept of nation as politically incorrect it was never replaced

7 Fieldwork materials, Tbilisi, 2015.

by a civic concept of nation, instead a sort of tolerant ethnic concept was developed (Hin 2003: 69). After the Rose Revolution an attempt was made by President Mikhail Saakashvili to overcome the ethnocultural understanding of Georgian nationhood and integrate minorities into the political and cultural life of Georgia. Jonathan Wheatley suggests that despite the emphasis on “civic nationalism” the markers of the new civic identity, first of all the Georgian language, were predominantly ethnically Georgian. The government’s commitment to promote nation-building by teaching the “Georgian national consciousness” provoked fear of assimilation among the members of ethnic minorities. Even in Saakashvili’s time historical narratives that emphasized ethnic Georgians’ unique claim to indigenesness in the country still prevailed. Jonathan Wheatley points out to the issue of language as an indicative example of such perception: officials and parliamentarians frequently argue that while Abkhazian may be recognized as a second state language on the territory of Abkhazia since it is an autochthonous language and is not used in any other “kin state” Armenian, Azerbaijani or Ossetian could not be granted that privilege since they do not fit these criteria (Wheatley 2009: 130-131).

The contemporary perception of Armenians and other minorities in Georgia as somehow linked to their “kin states” can be, in part at least, traced to the legacy of the Soviet nationality policy. In his famous article Yuri Slezkine employs the metaphor of a communal apartment to explain how the Soviet state treated the national question throughout its existence. In the Soviet communal apartment each “room” was assigned to a certain “titular nationality” members of which enjoyed a number of privileges while they lived on “their own” territory (Slezkine 1994: 450). Besides the ethnonational federalism that divided the territory of the state into a set of national territories another aspect of institutionalization of nationhood and nationality existed: The distinctive system of personal nationality inscribed in the passport of an individual. Thus when personal nationality of an individual coincided not with the “titular nationality” of the republic they lived in but with that of another Soviet Republic those individuals were considered “external” to a territory regardless of their actual connection to it. More significantly, in the Soviet Union personal nationality was an important legal category that influenced an individual’s status and could substantially influence life chances, especially in the sphere of higher education and certain types of employment (Brubaker 1996: 30-31).

As a “nontitular nationality” in Soviet Georgia, faced with discrimination large numbers of Armenians throughout the Soviet times moved from Tbilisi to Yerevan to pursue higher education in Armenian or to seek better career opportunities. Another strategy which Armenians in Tbilisi employed to improve their status while remaining in Georgia was pursuing secondary and higher education in Russian. Knowledge of the state language allowed members of the “nontitular nationality” gain more prestigious professional positions while it did not eradicate the unofficial restrictions barring them from entering the republic’s elites. The choice several

generations of Armenians in Tbilisi made in favor of Russian education significantly influenced the language situation in a large portion of the Armenian population. As a result many Armenians in Tbilisi consider Russian as their first language though even within this group most individuals remain multilingual with different levels of proficiency in Georgian and Armenian as well as Russian (Blauvelt and Berglund 2016: 74-75). Nonetheless, after the breakup of the Soviet Union lack of formal education in Georgian put a large part of the Armenian population in Tbilisi in an inferior position. Additionally, the link Armenians in Tbilisi developed to the Russian language and culture arouse suspicion towards them in the Post-Soviet Georgian society. Facing the challenges of the new unfavorable political realities many members of the Armenian minority in Tbilisi have turned to a certain discursive strategy based on the Armenian contribution to the historical development of Tbilisi which is supposed to ameliorate the Armenians' status in the Georgian society.

Armenians as Tbilisi natives: Turning to History to Negotiate Rights

The interviews I conducted in Tbilisi both with Armenians who distance themselves from any Armenian organizations and with those who to some degree participate in community life reveal that the majority of Armenians in Tbilisi identify themselves first of all as natives of the city. The ethnic stereotypes of Armenians as urban population and Georgians as country folk which were formed back in the 19th century still enjoy popularity among my Armenian interlocutors when they are speaking of Tbilisi's past, even its most recent periods. In support of this view a fifty-year old Armenian Levon⁸, whom I first met when he joined one of my Armenian friends and me for dinner, told me a joke:

«In Tbilisi a Georgian asks a taxi driver, “Are you Georgian?”

“Yes, I am”, he replies.

“Oh, that’s great. Where do you come from?”

“I’m from Tbilisi”

“And where is your grandfather from?”

“From Tbilisi”

“No-no, but where are you from originally?”

“I’m from Tbilisi.”

“Oh, so you are actually Armenian?!”⁹»

The joke perfectly illustrates the view that I would later hear multiple times during interviews with other research participants, at cultural events at the Armenian community centre and in everyday conversations with my Armenian acquaintances. The joke implies that local Armenians are native Tbilisians by origin and the ancestors of all the Georgians in Tbilisi used to live in the countryside and

8 I have changed the names of all research participants to protect their confidentiality.

9 Fieldwork materials. Tbilisi 2015.

came to Tbilisi from various regions of Georgia quite recently. It takes us back to the “Golden Age” of the Armenian community in Tbilisi, the 19th century, when both economic and political power at the local level belonged to Armenians. For the past century the ethnic composition of the population and power structure in the city has changed dramatically with Georgians gradually pushing Armenians to the periphery (Blauvelt and Berglund 2016: 82-83). It’s interesting to note that Levon who speaks Russian and sometimes Armenian in situations of informal communication with non-Georgians in his everyday life switched from Russian to Georgian to tell the joke. He stressed that it was a Georgian joke and he wanted me to hear the original version. Undoubtedly in so doing he tried to show that what he expressed was not only the opinion of the Armenians but that of the Georgians as well; thus his claim was supposedly legitimized.

The notion of “Armenian Tiflis” forms the core of the group identity of the Armenians residing in Tbilisi. This conclusion based on fieldwork data is confirmed by earlier research on the Armenian community of Tbilisi (Mkrtchian 2009: 305; Vardanyan 2006: 97). Research participants were well informed about the evidence of long Armenian presence in Tbilisi and always ready to share stories on Armenian churches, houses of Armenian merchants and philanthropists, streets named after famous Armenians etc. Even for those Armenians whose parents or grandparents came to Tbilisi from elsewhere the Armenian past of the city is equally important as for the research participants whose families have lived in Tbilisi for generations.

As I have discussed above, in Post-Soviet Georgia the notion of being indigenous to the country’s territory is of extreme importance since it is unofficially treated by state actors as a condition for granting various rights to a group. The view of Armenians as newcomers and diaspora which has been repeatedly promoted in some Georgian scholarly works and in the Georgian press¹⁰ is actively opposed both by local ethnic entrepreneurs and by journalists and scholars from Armenia. An Armenian from Tbilisi who used to be involved in Georgian politics comments on the situation in a newspaper article:

«Recently it is increasingly common to hear the expression ‘Armenian Diaspora of Georgia’, ‘a representative of the Armenian diaspora in Tbilisi’ etc. These expressions are wrong and therefore harmful both for Armenians and for the authorities of the Georgian Republic, which drawing from the meaning of this word may give an inaccurate interpretation to the phenomenon of Armenians in Georgia. ... <The Armenians here> are at home regardless of the political division of this territory... those people (Armenians who lived in Tbilisi in the 19th century) did not consider themselves any kind of diaspora. So why should we, their descendants, be called a diaspora?» (Mkrtumyan 2007).

10 For example in their book ‘Armenians in Georgia: From Ancient Times to Present’ Shota and Otar Tetvazde use the terms migrants, refugees and diaspora to refer to the Armenian population of Georgia in different historical periods (Tet’vazde and Tet’vazde 1998).

It appears that for the Armenians of Tbilisi employing the narrative on “the Armenian history” of the city and their contribution to its development is a strategy for negotiating their status and rights with the Georgian society as a whole. In their attempts to justify their right to cultural autonomy and various privileges members of the Armenian community more readily appeal to their own understanding of historical justice and their status as the indigenous population of the city rather than resorting to human rights discourse and turning to the international experience of minority policy.

Inexhaustible interest towards the Armenian contribution to the development of Tbilisi is evidently present among the local Armenians. Recently a series of lectures on the “traces of Armenian culture” in Tbilisi has been given at a church adjacent community center by a local Armenian blog writer. A few months before that, young members of the community participated in historical tours round the prominent “Armenian sites” of Tbilisi. The tours were organized by one of their peers – an Armenian student fascinated with local history. These are just two of the many examples.

A notion that Tbilisi along with the southern parts of modern Georgia’s territory (Kvemo Kartli and Javakheti) constituted a historical area of Armenian settlement is quite widespread among the Armenians in Tbilisi. This idea broadly relies on the interpretations research participants give to the works of Armenian scholarship. A number of research participants named «Materials for the History of the Georgian-Armenian Relations» by the Armenian journalist and public figure Khristofor Vermishev as the source of their knowledge on the subject. Vermishev analyzes the works of several historians who had been accused by the Georgian writer, publisher and one of the leaders of the Georgian national movement Ilia Chavchavadze of distorting history in order to disparage the Georgians and praise the Armenians in the eyes of the world in his famous article ‘Armenian Scholars and the Crying Stones’. Remarkably, while confirming that areas in the basin of Chorokhi and the upper reaches of Kura rivers belonged to Armenia in ancient times, the author does not openly agree with Osip Senkovsky, the only one among the scholars whose work he analyzes who claimed that Tbilisi used to belong to Armenia. Vermishev acknowledged that the work of Senkovsky was outdated and pointed out some of his mistakes though he insisted they didn’t make Senkovsky’s research ill-intentioned or anti-Georgian (Vermishev 1904: 10-13, 32-33). The fact that research participants refer to a book where the point they are trying to prove is to some extent criticized indicates to a bias on their part. The data that contradicts the main purpose of the local historical narrative they are producing is excluded even when it comes from works of Armenian scholars. The ancient history of the region is described by research participants in line with Senkovsky’s viewpoint: The River Kura served as the northern border of ancient Armenia and Tbilisi was an Armenian city. Just like Senkovsky some research participants believe that the word *Iber*, the name of an-

cient Georgians derived from the name of their land – *Iberia*, is of Armenian origin¹¹.

Though informants do speak of longevity of the Armenian presence in Tbilisi the historical narrative they are constructing is actually centered on a rather recent period in the history of the city. The 19th century is considered the Golden Age of “Armenian Tiflis” when the Armenian bourgeoisie had an exceptional influence both on economic and political life of the city. Arman, a 52-year old painter, describes the role the Armenians played in the development of the city in the following way:

«Here in Tbilisi in general, I won't speak of other [Georgian] cities, entrepreneurs and the richest people actually were Armenians on the whole. Well, Tbilisi was a city that lied on the Silk Road, and merchants, entrepreneurs found here a good place for their businesses, and started to slowly develop it»¹².

Despite the ambiguous and changeable attitude of the Russian administration wealthy Armenian merchants and manufacturers managed to benefit from the new political situation as Georgia lost its independence and became a part of the Russian Empire¹³.

The reason why such great attention is paid to this period by the Armenians is the fact that the canonical architectural scene of Old Tbilisi was formed at that time. Apart from a few churches and the ruins of the old fortress there are not many buildings from earlier periods in the city since it was burned to the ground during the Persian invasion of Agha Mohammad Khan in 1795. From the point of view of many Tbilisi Armenians it is the Armenian businessmen who should be thanked for restoration of Tbilisi and its transformation into a modern European city in the 19th century since many houses, particularly in the Sololaki district, were built on their dime. More importantly the Armenians stress the role of Tbilisi mayors who were predominantly Armenian in the development of the city. As a researcher from Armenia, Samvel Karapetyan (2003: 5) writes in the introduction to his book titled «Mayors of Tiflis (Tbilisi)»:

«Generations who are using values created in the past and are proud of them must know the creators of these imperishable values. Learning about the mayors of Tiflis who spent their creative effort building it is a kind of tribute that generations can and should pay to honor them».

11 In their explanations research participants employed the Armenian *‘i ver’* meaning ‘above’ as the etymology. An explanation followed that the Georgians came ‘from above’, i. e. from the north. Senkovsky treats the issue a little differently, ‘It is said that the word *iber* or *iver* like it's pronounced by some people comes from Armenian where *iverets* is supposed to mean a mountaineer.’ (Vermishev 1904: 19).

12 Fieldwork materials, Tbilisi, 2015.

13 Ronald Suny gives a detailed analysis of the attitudes that the Russian administration had towards the Armenians in the 19th century in ‘Looking toward Ararat: Armenians in Modern History’ (Suny 1993: 31-51).

Another topic that is constantly mentioned by research participants are the Armenian philanthropists and their donations to the city.

In the above mentioned book Karapetyan continues with a quote without mentioning the source:

«Back in the 1870s it was noted that Tiflis was ‘a hallway, a vestibule to Armenia’ and that ‘it wasn’t the Georgians but the Persians, the Turks and the Germans that the Armenians took Tiflis from; not illegally, treacherously and in the dark of the night did they do that but by honest labor, with honest money, in their right mind and in broad daylight» (Ibid.).

The author then gives a list of governors of Tbilisi from amiras and shaaps of the 12th–13th centuries to meliks of the 17th–18th centuries and mayors in 1840–1917 stressing that 45 out of 47 “mayors” were Armenian. Karapetyan refers to all these governors from different historical periods as “mayors”. Even though he omits five centuries of the city’s history in his book he says that the Armenian mayors “built and developed Tiflis for almost 800 years” (Ibid., 101). Karapetyan also mentions that the Armenian mayors continuously governed Tiflis regardless of the political situation under Georgian, Persian, Turkish and finally Russian rule even at the end of 19th century when the Armenians didn’t constitute the majority of the city’s population and became merely a plurality.

In contrast with the Armenian mayors who in the author’s opinion immensely influenced the landscape of the city Karapetyan describes the succeeding 34 Georgian mayors as incompetent in urban planning and incapable not only of taking the city development to the new level but even of preserving what had been created before them. Thus the main point of the book is that the age of prosperity that Tbilisi experienced thanks to the Armenian governors ended as soon as the city fell into Georgian hands implying that the Georgians did not have enough experience of life in the city. Besides that Karapetyan accuses the Georgian mayors of historical amnesia and ungratefulness towards the Armenian mayors since their graves in Tbilisi are either lost or consciously destroyed as opposed to the graves of the Georgian mayors which are preserved (Ibid.: 100–103). Samvel Karapetyan’s books on the Armenian cultural heritage in Georgia including «Mayors of Tiflis (Tbilisi)» and «Georgian State Policy and Historical Armenian Monuments, 1988–1998» are highly popular among the Armenians of Tbilisi who named them as accurate sources on the subject multiple times during the interviews. In fact, researchers and journalists from Armenia actively participate in the Armenian-Georgian dispute over Tbilisi. Relying on my fieldwork data it’s safe to say that their works significantly influence the rhetoric of Tbilisi Armenians. Georgian scholars and journalists as well as Georgian officials view Karapetyan’s work as highly controversial and anti-Georgian (Saneblidze 2014).

It is very indicative that in 2015 Karapetyan's name was added to the list of people declared *personae non gratae* in Georgia¹⁴.

The interest towards the Armenian legacy in Tbilisi is growing even stronger among Armenian community members as, according to local Armenians, the last traces of "Armenian Tiflis" are slipping away. While showing his drawings depicting the Old Town Davit, a seventy-year old painter told me that he is trying to capture "Armenian Tiflis" on canvas before it is all wiped out. Dramatic changes in the architectural scene of Tbilisi that took place in the years of Georgia's independence are unanimously and unambiguously treated by Tbilisi Armenians as evidence of policy directed at Georgianization of the city landscape and elimination of the Armenian cultural heritage. For research participants this process is closely connected to Georgianization of the Armenian population of Tbilisi as they believe that tens of thousands of Armenians took Georgian last names to avoid discrimination. At present there are about fifty thousand Armenians in Tbilisi. The Armenians themselves state there are one hundred fifty thousand Armenians in the city including those who speak Georgian and don't know Armenian or have changed their last names. Adopting a Georgian last name is in fact a common practice among the Armenians in Georgia that became even more widespread in the 1990s (Komakhia 2008: 185). It's hard to assess the scale of this process but the figures provided by research participants seem exaggerated to some extent. Many research participants shared stories of how they attempted to change the Russified versions of their last names ending with *-ov* to genuine Armenian ones ending with *-yan* (e. g. Babajanov to Babajanyan) as a sign of protest against Georgianization but were turned down by the officials.

Preservation of the Armenian legacy was among the central issues for Tbilisi Armenians during late Soviet and early independence years. In response to the growing Georgian nationalism Armenians began to unite, at first around the Armenian Cultural-Benevolent Society founded in 1989. The Society organized several cultural and charitable events in Tbilisi. It was transformed into the Union of Armenians of Georgia a year later in 1990 and officially registered in 1991. Originally its members took interest in the issue of Armenian architectural monuments in Tbilisi, though research participants say at the time not much was done apart from declarations. Research participants describe the period of Gamsakhurdia's rule and civil war years as a time when they were afraid to even speak Armenian or Russian in public. Still a few years later the Union once again took up the issue of the churches contested by the Armenians and the Georgians and managed to put it on the political agenda while trying to gain support from the Head of the Armenian Apostolic Church (Hin 2003: 78). In 1995 Armenian activists protested the beginning of construction work in the contested Norashen church that was allegedly directed at restoration of the monument. Armenian activists claimed that a Georgian priest from a church nearby

14 Samvel Karapetyan himself addressed this issue at a press conference. The video of the press conference is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQdHQ64V37Y>.

who was in charge of the project was in fact trying to destroy historical evidence showing that the church belonged to Armenians. From that point on the yet unresolved issue of contested churches was constantly present in the mass media. In the early 2000s the protests poured out to the streets of Tbilisi when a large number of Armenians accompanied by Armenian priests managed to enter the locked No-rashen church in yet another attempt to establish control over it¹⁵.

To this day the Armenians and the Georgians dispute over numerous religious and secular buildings and cemeteries in Tbilisi. Local Armenians perceive the recently erected main cathedral of the Georgian Orthodox church, Sameba, as possibly the main symbol of this historical debate. The site where the new cathedral was built was once an Armenian architectural complex Khojivank that consisted of a church and an Armenian memorial cemetery, the largest in Tbilisi. The church and most part of the cemetery were destroyed in the 1930s and the site was later turned into a park. Construction of a Georgian church on the site that used to be an Armenian cemetery was perceived as an act of disrespect and even sacrilege. The Armenians of Tbilisi interpreted it as a manifestation of Georgian nationalist policy designed to eliminate any trace of Armenian presence in the city. Standing on the top of the Elia hill, Samreba rises above the Avlabari (or Havlabar in Armenian) district that is considered historically Armenian as a reminder: For Tbilisi Armenians Khojivank represents a perfect metaphor for the 'Armenian Tiflis' that they feel is being taken away from them. The motif of loss and destruction was present in most interviews with members of the Armenian community of Tbilisi.

The situation is treated in the same manner in an essay titled 'Old Tbilisi – a Vanished Civilisation' published in Armenia in the newspaper 'Golos Armenii'. The author, Nora Kananova who was born and raised in Tbilisi and now lives in Yerevan writes:

"In mid 1970-s the process of swift urbanization threw the pot where a peculiar type of Tbilisian was being cooked off the hearth. A generation of new citizens, Tbilisians by propiska¹⁶ only, which was much more numerous than the city natives, appeared in the Georgian capital that had grown into a city with a population of one million people. Buildings constructed by Armenians ceased to be a value for them; instead they became easily the main reason for Armenophobia.

15 Yulia Antonian discussed the issue of contested churches in more detail in a conference presentation. Unfortunately the results of this research are not published yet. A video of the presentation titled "Contesting the Religious Landscape: Social and Cultural Background of Discourses on 'Georgianization' of the Armenian Churches in Tbilisi" is available at: http://www.indiana.edu/~video/stream/launchflash.html?folder=video&filename=arisc_Antonyan.mp4. Access date: 18.02.2017.

16 During the Soviet period the term propiska was used to refer both to the residency permit that allowed a person to live in a given place and to the mark in the internal passport indicating that its holder has such permit.

At that time not only the names but the buildings themselves began to disappear from Tbilisi landscape. This process has been going on till today as each of these stone relics is virtually screaming about the things that the Georgians would like to forget for the sake of state interests and national pride. The house of Melik-Azaryants survived only because the demolition of this huge building which took up an entire quarter in the centre of the city cost even more than construction of a new one.” (Kananova 2010).

Similar ideas were expressed by recently deceased Sargis Darchinyan, an Armenian photographer and a student of local lore from Tbilisi who was considered an expert on the history of ‘Armenian Tiflis’ by many members of the Armenian community. He writes: “Another Armenian hearth in Georgia has fallen victim to political upheavals. Sololaki district that once was filled with Armenian spirit, where dozens of national organization were operating, has emptied”. He continues:

“The new owners of Tbilisi taking into consideration first of all their own profit designed a program titled ‘New life for Old Tbilisi’ allegedly aimed at preservation of the historical image of the capital. Its implementation has begun in Meydan, Sololaki and Kukia districts... It’s true that the districts start a new life, though they reappear completely distorted before the eyes of Tbilisians. Thereby history is being eliminated and the bond between the past and present is being destroyed” (Darchinyan 2013: 25).

It’s noteworthy that some Tbilisi Armenians have developed an opinion that the entire cultural legacy of the city belongs to the Armenians. Such views are in fact a manifestation of minority nationalism which increased among a part of Armenians in Tbilisi as a reaction to Georgianization of the urban landscape. Those who share this opinion, for example, add the main Georgian cathedral Sioni to the list of Armenian architectural monuments or call the building where the city hall is situated “Matinov’s house”. They do so because they believe that the building used to belong to mayor Matinov who gave it to the city as a gift. Though actually before it was renovated and turned into the city hall the building belonged to a police department. At the same time most research participants stressed the multiethnic nature of Tbilisi’s culture noting that the Armenian contribution to the development of the city was an important but not the only one.

Though Armenians in Tbilisi routinely resort to historical narratives attempting to renegotiate their position in Post-Soviet Georgia utilization of this strategy mostly fails to secure the desired results and leads to further development of anti-Armenian stereotypes commonly referred to as Armenophobia in the Georgian society¹⁷. The Georgians react negatively to the Armenian historical claims and the notion of “Armenian Tiflis” in general. In the Georgian press and scholarly works one can find

17 On Armenophobia in the Georgian society see an article by the Georgian historian Giorgi Maisuradze (2011).

two main discursive strategies for resolving the biggest challenge facing the newly reshaped Georgian national narrative i. e. explaining why the national capital was demographically and economically dominated by the Armenians in the 19th century. Along with pointing out the migrant or diaspora origin of the Armenian population of Tbilisi several authors also employ the thesis about conversion to monophysitism and subsequent Armenization of the large portion of the city's population which was originally Georgian (Topchishvili 1989; Tetvadze and Tetvadze 1998; Japaridze 2010). The history of Tbilisi has become a stumbling block in the relationship between the Armenian minority and the Georgian society at large. Historical debates seem to be part of the reason for distrust and suspicion towards the Armenians as well as anti-Armenian publications which can be found from time to time in the Georgian press. Research participants trace the roots of this antagonism between the Georgians and the Armenians back to a particular point in history, the time when both the Georgian and the Armenian national elites were forming in Tbilisi at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Describing this antagonism in purely ethnic terms Armenians and Georgians today tend to remain oblivious to its complex structure and political reasons behind it.

Besides shaping the relationship between the Georgian society and the Armenian minority the narrative on "Armenian Tiflis" plays an important role within the researched community. It appears that for many Tbilisi Armenians attention to the notion of "Armenian Tiflis" and turning to the glorious Armenian past is a strategy of coping with their low socio-economic status that significantly deteriorated with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Armenians perceive recognition of the Armenian contribution into the development of the city as a source of symbolical power that will lift the stigma often placed on the members of the minority group by the Georgian majority.

Diaspora Identity Construction Among Armenians in Tbilisi: The Role of Institutions

As I've already established for various reasons to this day most Armenians in Tbilisi do not commonly refer to themselves as diaspora and even refute this definition. In this part of the article I would like to analyze how diaspora identity is currently being promoted among Tbilisi Armenians both through initiatives coming from Armenia and by local actors.

Firstly, the question of how the Armenian state defines diaspora should be addressed. While traditionally the notion of Armenian diaspora was restricted to those communities that were formed as a result of the Armenian Genocide, Kristin Cavoukian points out that in the recent years the Republic of Armenia tends to define almost all Armenians living outside of Armenia and the de-facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh as diaspora (Cavoukian 2013: 712-713). Still the new definition is going through a phase of transitions. While in their official statements Armenian

politicians employ universalizing discourse on Armenian diaspora, interviews with staff members of the Ministry of Diaspora reveal a degree of ambivalence in their perception of certain Armenian communities:

*“For us all Armenians living outside of Armenia are representatives of the Spyurq. To me it’s saddening but that’s a fact that most Armenians live outside of their homeland... After the Soviet times the Armenians of Georgia did not consider themselves a part of Spyurq, we considered them... not Spyurq but this ‘definition’ is gradually being accepted... Our work makes us view them as a diaspora community because the fact remains that they live outside of their homeland”.*¹⁸

Cavoukian suggests that the universalizing stance on the part of the Armenia towards Armenians living outside of its borders undoubtedly affects their willingness to form diaspora institutions and behave as diaspora members. While Armenia’s diaspora policy due to a number of factors was rather passive in the 1990s, since then Armenia has begun to treat diaspora management as a priority. The most prominent institutionalization efforts undertaken by Armenia in this sphere included organization of three Armenia-Diaspora conferences and creation of a specific Ministry of Diaspora in 2008 (Cavoukian 2013: 712-713). The mission of this new body of the Armenian government is three-fold. The Ministry advocated protection of “Armenianness” among the members of the diaspora. It’s second goal is to harness and utilize the potential of diaspora which can be used for Armenia’s development. Thirdly the Ministry is concentrating on strengthening ethnonational reawakening (Ibid.: 717). One of the projects of the Ministry of Diaspora that is supposed to actively promote its views among Armenians in different countries is a program called “Ari Tun” through which birthright journeys are organized for young Armenians all over the world. Though the program has received much criticism in the Armenian press and it’s effectiveness can be questioned it does have a certain influence on the young Armenians in Tbilisi and contributes to construction of diaspora identity. The Ministry of Diaspora also provides textbooks for Armenian language classes and funding for a number of cultural initiatives.

While the Ministry of Diaspora claims to collaborate with all Armenian organizations in any country on equal terms interviews with its staff members as well as with representatives of different religious and secular Armenian organizations in Tbilisi reveal that this institution maintains a closer relationship with the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic church in Georgia and the cultural center “Hayartun” established by the Diocese in 2011. Unofficially those two organizations are viewed by the staff of the Ministry of Diaspora as legitimate representatives of Armenia in Tbilisi. I would like to have a closer look at the activities of these organizations be-

18 Fieldwork materials. Yerevan, 2015.

cause it is through their effort that the perception of Armenians in Tbilisi as diaspora is being promoted¹⁹.

The role of the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic church in Georgia is somehow ambivalent. On the one hand, it is a branch of the Armenian Apostolic church with the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin as its center. On the other hand, the Diocese tries to appear as a separate entity in the eyes of the Georgian society to avoid accusations of being an agent of Armenia. Though the connection between Apostolic church and Armenia is unquestioned by local Armenians. One of the research participants, a frequent churchgoer, referred to the Armenian church as a “cultural embassy”. Indeed, the Armenian church views its mission as going far beyond religious matters. One of the priests expressed it in the following way:

*“In a foreign land our church plays a role of a uniting force. Our church does not attend only to the affairs of the church, but also takes up the task of educating and bringing up children and the people because from the beginning, from the year 301 for the people our church became a school, a university, a highly important hearth the people would gather around. That is why in diaspora we connect everything to the church and its premises, its presence becomes a little Armenia in the strange land”*²⁰.

During sermons and weekly spirituality classes the issues of preservation of “Armenianness” are addressed almost as often as religious topics. Remarkably members of the clergy constantly underscore that Armenians in Tbilisi live in a foreign country where the Armenian identity is in danger. More importantly besides cultural matters the priests draw the attention of the parishioners to pressing issues facing Armenia urging them to remain loyal to the homeland and provide assistance in the time of need.

This trend was particularly visible during the Karabakh crisis of April 2016. The workers of the church-adjacent cultural center turned to visitors and students with the same appeal. Those attending classes and cultural events were frequently reminded of the ongoing battles on the border of Karabakh and encouraged to make a contribution for the needs of those fighting. A charity auction was organized by the cultural center to raise money for that cause. Local painters donated their art for the event. Prior to the auction heated speeches on the hardships of soldiers' everyday lives on the border were delivered by the representatives of the cultural center and community activists. On the background videos from Karabakh were shown accompanied by patriotic songs. At the end of the event one of the local Armenians took the floor and expressing his solidarity with Armenia and Karabakh took off his wedding ring

19 Though a large number of Armenian organizations, mainly in the form of NGOs, are registered in Tbilisi, few of these organizations are active. In this article I specifically address only two Armenian institutions which activities contribute to diaspora identity construction among local Armenians.

20 Fieldwork materials. Tbilisi, 2016.

and donated it; his wife followed his example. In April 2016 similar fundraising events took place in Armenian communities in different countries. What is noteworthy here is the message sent by the organizers. While in Armenia at that time the government was widely criticized, the director of the cultural center telling about his trip to Karabakh right after the beginning of the crisis showed a photo of the son of Armenia's Minister of Defence. He explained that he met the young man fighting on the front line. This gesture clearly indicated that the community center promotes loyalty not only towards the Karabakh cause but towards Armenia's leadership as well.

In the recent years a number of initiatives have been undertaken by the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic church in Georgia to mobilize Armenians of Tbilisi and create a link with Armenia. One of the major changes that was introduced into the life of the Diocese was related to religious calendar. The Julian calendar which was traditionally followed in Tbilisi was replaced with the Gregorian calendar so that celebration of religious feasts in Tbilisi would take place on the same days as in Armenia. Besides the symbolic purpose of reconnecting with Holy Etchmiadzin the change in the religious calendar seems to have an implicit goal as well. Uncoupling of the religious feasts of the Armenian Apostolic church from those of the Georgian Orthodox church should strengthen a sense of cultural distinction among the parishioners. Through the efforts of the employees of the Diocese as well as volunteers a census is being conducted in Tbilisi and other regions of Georgia. The purpose of the census was two-fold: to gather information about the parishioners and to inform on upcoming events in the cultural center and religious celebrations those who provided their contacts through text messages. Another important change concerns the language used at church. Naturally Armenian has always been the language of the church service. In the recent years the priests began to hold weekly spirituality classes in Armenian even though traditionally these classes were held in Russian as many Armenians who attend them do not know Armenian well enough to follow what is being said during class. Remarkably all those changes took place after a new head of the Diocese who served in Armenia for most of his career and was involved in promoting patriotic upbringing arrived in Tbilisi from Armenia in 2002.

It needs to be underscored that even though the official stance of the Armenian church is that Armenians in Tbilisi are part of the diaspora several local priests who were born and raised in Georgia do not share this view. In an interview one of the priests born in Georgia expressed his opinion on the status of Armenians in Georgia and the role played by the church:

“You know, we are a separate Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic church in Georgia but it is unnecessary for Armenia to exert any influence on us. Yes, we are representatives of the Armenian church in Georgia but first of all we are citizens of this country and have to love and protect it in the same way as other nationalities, first of all the Georgians, who live here. I don't consider the Armenian community of Georgia as diaspora or spyurk', because here we are organized in a completely

different way, we've been living here from time immemorial, we are not newcomers to be called a diaspora"²¹.

The effort spent by the priests and workers of the cultural center on diaspora identity construction among Armenians in Tbilisi is met with mixed feelings. It is among churchgoers and visitors of the cultural center one can hear that Armenians in Tbilisi constitute a diaspora though the number of Armenians who self-identify in that way is not large. While cultural affinity and the need to maintain a connection go without a question, the attempts undertaken by ethnic entrepreneurs to introduce a political dimension into the life of the community is met with suspicion. As an Armenian woman moderately involved in the life of the community said, suggesting that such activities result in creation of potentially harmful conflicting loyalties: *"At the cultural center some people think that we should be more Armenians than Georgian citizens"*²².

It is noteworthy that some research participants see the interests of Armenians in Tbilisi and the interests of the Armenian state as opposing:

*"We are the indigenous population of this land. The mistake of the Georgian party is that they consider only Georgians to be the indigenous population of this territory... Today it is Georgia – no problem but don't not forget that we were born and raised here as well. It is our interest to get our churches back; Armenia's interest is to always maintain a good relationship with Georgia, so that the road <to Russia> would never get blocked. So there is a conflict. Armenia cannot bang its fist on the table and cannot do anything because we are held hostage here. On the other hand it would be so easy for Armenia if we were not here"*²³.

Thus the perceived conflict of interests impedes the process of diaspora identity construction among Armenians in Tbilisi promoted by the Armenian Apostolic Church. The number of Armenians involved in the diasporic project in Tbilisi is relatively small as compared to the entire Armenian population of the city. It is mostly among frequent church goers and cultural center visitors that the new self-perception as diaspora can be found.

Conclusion

Renegotiation of the status and identities of Armenians in Tbilisi is an ongoing process that began after the political space in the region underwent a dramatic change with the breakup of the Soviet Union. In this paper I addressed two seemingly mutually exclusive claims on the status of Armenians in Tbilisi. The study reveals that most Armenian research participants tend to present themselves as Tbilisi na-

21 Fieldwork materials. Tbilisi, 2016.

22 Fieldwork materials. Tbilisi, 2016.

23 Fieldwork materials. Tbilisi, 2015.

tives while diaspora stance among Armenians in Tbilisi is incipient. The emergence of the new perception of Armenians in Tbilisi as diaspora stems from a number of factors including the attitude of the nationalizing Georgian state towards minorities, the development of Armenia's diaspora policy and the activities of the local ethnic entrepreneurs. In the future the relationship dynamic in this triadic nexus between the Georgian state, the Armenian minority and the Armenian state will define whether this diasporic stance will receive wider support among Armenians in Tbilisi.

It is also noteworthy that rather often a single individual in an interview makes seemingly mutually exclusive claims, i. e. identifies as both a Tbilisi native and a member of the Armenian diaspora. It shows that identities are fluid and context dependent and that a clear boundary could not be drawn between those presenting themselves as native Tbilisians and those who identify themselves as a part of the diaspora. In fact, it is not two separate groups of people that a researcher encounters but two competing discursive strategies which are employed by an individual based on the situation. In the rhetoric of research participants diaspora is much less connected with spatial dimension and dispersion than with interests, loyalties and projects. Thus analyzing this context we should treat diaspora as a "category of practice" (Brubaker 2005: 12).

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