

# From Roots to Routes: The Role of Ethnic Networks in the Development of Migrant Communities in Russia

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*This article examines the role of ethnic networks in the development of migrant communities by focusing on modern-day Armenian migration to Russia. While much existing research on migrant networks tends to focus on newly arrived migrants' experiences of gaining support in the destination countries through ethnic networks, little has been said about the impact of ethnic networks on migrant community development. Additionally, studies on the Armenian communities' development are mainly focused on the historical context and scholars see little interest in studying modern-day Armenian migration and migrant community development. Drawing on empirical data from Armenia, this study explores how post-Soviet migration to Russia shapes contemporary Armenian communities there. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research conducted in 2020–2021, the article studies the significance of ethnic networks at both individual and collective levels. The quantitative research results offer insights into the role of ethnic networks in shaping migratory routes, while qualitative research highlights how these networks contribute to community construction, driven by regional affiliations that differ from traditional Armenian diaspora institutions. The study reveals the multiple roles of ethnic networks, including their influence on migratory behaviour, their persistence and importance across generations and their impact on community organisations' development and leadership. It also highlights migrants' preferences for engaging with their regions or villages of origin.*

*Keywords: ethnic networks, migrant community, post-Soviet migration*

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## Introduction

Russia has the largest population of ethnic Armenians outside Armenia (approximately 2 million) and, given Armenia's tiny population of approximately 3 million people, the importance of Russia as a receiving country for Armenian migrants and diaspora is significant. The need to study post-Soviet Armenian communities has been underlined by several scholars. For example, Torosyan and Vardanyan (2020) and Cavoukian (2013) differentiate between two major segments of the Armenian diaspora: the 'victim' diaspora – formed mainly after the Genocide – and recent migration flows from Armenia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. When referring to migrants from Armenia, Tölölyan and Papazian (2014) underline that many important links and the heterogeneity of the Armenian diaspora remain understudied. This lack of research is not unexpected, considering that the establishment of Armenian diasporic communities mainly arose from the compelled displacement of Armenians from their ancestral homeland in the Ottoman Empire during the 1915 Genocide (Panossian 2003). Armenian communities, like Jewish and Greek diasporas, have often been categorised as 'traditional', 'classical' or 'historical' diasporas (Armstrong 1976; Safran 1991; Smith 1986). The existing scholarship on Armenian migration has predominantly focused on classical diaspora attributes, such as forced displacement, a strong sense of victimhood, a deep nostalgic connection to the homeland and a distinct organisational basis (Shain 1994; Vertovec 1997). However, there has been limited exploration of post-Soviet migration waves from Armenia and the emergence of new Armenian diasporic communities that do not fit into the conventional 'victim' or 'classical' diaspora framework. The Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, coupled with economic crises, high unemployment rates, low wages and political instability, has played a significant role in influencing Armenian emigration since the fall of the Soviet Union. These factors have given rise to a new wave of Armenian migration, leading to the development of new communities that exhibit characteristics distinct from those of the classical or traditional diaspora.

In the meantime, contemporary literature focusing on diverse global communities such as the Chinese, Mexican, Turkish, Moroccan or Ukrainian diasporas considers not only social, economic or push and pull factors but also the migrant networks that enabled the migration waves (Cheung 2004; Collins 2002; Hoffman, Makovsky and Werz 2020; Kesici 2021). Nevertheless, while many authors have extensively studied the role of ethnic networks at the individual migrant level, the exploration of ethnic networks in community construction has been largely overlooked. Moreover, ethnic networks' functionalities have been mainly studied as a migratory phenomenon typical for the first generation of migrants and the experiences of second- or third-generation migrants in maintaining these ties have remained understudied (Bruneau 2010).

To address the specific gap in the literature concerning the role of ethnic networks in the process of community construction, the article reflects on the recent migration from Armenia and the formation of new Armenian communities in different parts of the Russian Federation during the post-Soviet period. We examine the role of ethnic networks in creating communities with the aim of enriching the literature on both modern Armenian migration and recently developed migrant communities. This study highlights that migrants from specific places or regions of origin form communities – and continuously replenish and sustain them over generations – based on their ethnic networks. Additionally, these Armenian communities establish their organisations based mainly on their pre-migratory regional origins, which differ from the traditional diaspora institutions of the Armenian diaspora. Traditional diaspora institutions typically have a transnational character, connecting Armenian diasporic institutions worldwide through hierarchically organised institutional networks. In contrast, the newly formed organisations in Russia centre their activities within the city where their members have settled, primarily focusing on their kinship networks. Their transnational activities, however, are mainly directed toward the regions, villages or cities from which they originated. They form organisations that prefer to maintain ties with the regions or settlements from where they originate.

The article starts with a theoretical discussion that focuses on the clarification of the key terms used in this study as well as the significance of ethnic networks in the migration literature. It is followed by a brief historical overview of Armenian migration to Russia. The subsequent section outlines the methodological approach of the article, which combines both quantitative and qualitative methods. The main body of the article follows a two-tier structure: the first section presents the findings of a survey conducted in 2020–2021, examining the role of ethnic networks in shaping individual migratory routes. In the subsequent section, a qualitative analysis of the role of ethnic networks in the process of community construction is presented. Finally, the conclusion summarises the key findings of the study and establishes connections with relevant issues in contemporary migration studies.

### Theoretical discussions

Before delving into the discussion, it is essential to provide clear definitions for the terms ‘diaspora’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘community’. We adopt Brubaker’s (2006) perspective, which emphasises that race and ethnicity are social constructs for categorising the self and others. Thus, when using the term ‘ethnicity’, we refer to the ethnic belonging of migrants which, in a non-ethnic environment, provides the internal cohesion of community members, delineating boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘others’.

In line with Brubaker’s viewpoint (2005), we look at diaspora as a category of practice and at the formation of a diasporic community as an outcome of mobilisation processes that are developed in various ways by political leaders and intellectuals. The development of post-Soviet Armenian communities and community organisations in Russia is unique and largely differs from Western diasporas. This is because Armenians in Russia found it difficult to consider themselves as diasporans, as they all used to be citizens of the USSR (Libardian 1999). In this regard, Lourie (1999) noted that Armenians living in various cities of the former Soviet Union usually did not use the words ‘diaspora’, as the territory was not perceived as foreign. The word community (*obshchina*) has been used in the Russian-language academic literature when referring to Armenian migration to Russia (see, for example, Agadzhanyan 2016; Bzarov 2019; Zakhar’yan 2013). Continuing in this vein, we adopt the term ‘community’ or ‘migrant community’ without juxtaposing it against the term ‘diaspora’ but, rather, underscoring its distinctiveness as not solely comprising the descendants of a ‘victim diaspora’ but as an outcome of recent migration waves since the 1990s.

With ‘community’ or ‘migrant community’ we are referring to individuals and groups who identify as Armenians, who are involved in activities promoted by Armenian associations or institutions and who take (some) part in either formal or informal community mobilisation projects (Galstyan and Ambrosini 2023). When migrants become active members of a migrant organisation, it can be assumed that they wish to retain ties with their home countries and co-ethnics, as opposed to entirely immersing themselves in new host societies. We consider diaspora engagement as another important indicator of community development. Werbner (2002) finds that cultural, political and philanthropic sentimental performances are key defining aspects of diasporic communities. In other words, diasporic communities exist in their ability to mobilise fellow diaspora members to a common cause. Diaspora engagement is a ‘purposive action’ (Brinkerhoff 2008) driven by ties of co-responsibility, which differentiate a diaspora from an ethnic community. Van Hear and Cohen (2017) proposed to distinguish three spheres of diaspora engagement: a) household and extended family – this is a largely personal and private sphere of engagement; b) known community sphere – this takes place in spaces where one has lived, where van Hear distinguishes hometown associations, home village associations and school associations as the main forms of organisation that are engaged in collective remittances and the transfer of financial resources to the communities left behind; and c) imagined community – the term here is borrowed from Anderson (2020), who refers to the nation with which one has an affinity without necessarily

knowing the members. The article also highlights how migrant networks turn into communities through the mobilisation process.

As we delve into the dynamics of community formation, it becomes vital to examine the scholarly discourse on migrant networks within the migration literature. Understanding how these networks have been discussed and the extent to which they contribute to the establishment and endurance of migrant communities is of paramount importance.

Building upon the exploration of community dynamics, it is important to examine the scholarly discourse on migrant networks in the migration literature – more specifically, understanding how these networks have been discussed and their contribution to the establishment and endurance of migrant or diasporic communities. Douglas S. Massey has provided a well-known definition of migrant networks: ‘sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship and shared community origin’ (Massey 1999: 42). The idea that migrant networks function as a capital for gaining social support and social leverage is not new. Researchers agree that migrant networks connect migrants at a destination to individuals at origin and enable continuous migration (Chuatico and Haan 2022; de Haas 2009; Köngeter and Smith 2015; Ryan, Sales, Tilki and Siara 2008). Portes (1998) described the provision of resources to members of the same ethnic, religious and territorial group to facilitate the migration process as ‘tied solidarity’. Migrant networks, including ethnic networks, play a guiding, contributing and supportive role. Networked migration usually starts with a family member and later expands to a group of people from the same location who migrate to the new destination country with the help of their migrant relatives and fellow community members (de Haas 2010; Fawcett 1989). A settlement of pioneers is the first step in establishing a community in the new location, as they stimulate further migration expansion among family members, relatives and friends in the country of origin (Bakewell, de Haas and Kubal 2012; Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino and Taylor 1994; Vertovec 2002). Network connections also constitute a valuable form of social capital facilitating access to the labour market (Dagnelie, Mayda and Maystadt 2019; Damm 2009; Gericke, Burmeister, Löwe, Deller and Pundt 2018; Massey 1987). In more recent studies, the role of ethnic and social networks has been studied within the context of irregular migration (Castles, Arias Cubas, Kim and Ozkul 2012; Dennison 2022; Kuschminder, De Bresser and Siegel 2015; van Uden and Jongerden 2021) and migrant smuggling (Triandafyllidou 2015). Ambrosini (2017: 7) argues that ‘having a reliable contact in the receiving society pays more than a high-school diploma in irregular migrants’ ventures’, while the lack of support networks or the inability to build them may result in social isolation and social weakness (Ambrosini 2018). Scholars do not necessarily insist that networks are exclusively positive, supportive and empowering, as they also highlight the negative aspects of networks (e.g. Portes 1998). The negative aspects are that they may be limiting migrants’ opportunities, for example by channeling migrants into low-paid, dead-end jobs. Networks can also function as closed, restricted or elitist groups that operate in ways that limit access to valuable resources (Ryan, Eve and Keskiner 2022).

While many recently developed communities have ethnic networks as a basis for community development, the role of migrant networks has been mostly discussed at an individual level. The role of ethnic networks in the diaspora development process has remained largely unnoticed (de Haas 2007, 2009). A well-known example is Turkish migration to Western Europe and the USA (Kilic and Biffl 2021) after the end of the guestworker programmes in the 1960s, as well as political upheavals in Turkey in 1971 and 1980. Similarly, research on Mexico–US migration has illustrated that having kinship and sending community ties have been key drivers for migration to the US (Davis and Winters 2001; Kanaiaupuni 2000; Massey 1987). Modern diasporas have evolved, as the migration movement accelerated in the 1950s by European acceptance of labour migrants and, after 1965, by the Hart-Celler Act that facilitated non-European-origin migration and entry to the US (Gerber 2021; Wolgin 2011). Several studies focusing on the Armenian diaspora in Eastern Europe

have underlined the presence of migratory networks and chain migration as important factors for migratory behaviour (Siekierski and Troebst 2016). The development of several communities was based on chain migration – migrants assisting family members, friends and neighbours in migrating and joining them in their new host countries. These migration waves have become the basis for the development of new communities – or new communities that join pre-existing ones (Galstyan, Hakobyan, Mnatsakanyan and Galstyan 2022). Nevertheless, many aspects of the role of ethnic networks in the context of community developments have remained unnoticed, such as intra-community structure, engagement priorities, organisational basis and management. For example, hometown associations (HTAs) that are closely related to ethnic networks have been approached within the nexus of migration and development: ‘transnational’ institutions that link migrants to family and townspeople who stayed behind and link the flow of remittances sent by migrants to their home communities (Fitzgerald 2008). By focusing on ethnic networks, we unpack the heterogeneity of migrants’ communities, in consideration that one of the main characteristics of the modern conceptualisation of them is the recognition of their heterogeneity and dynamic character that ‘is defined not by essence or purity but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity’ (Hall 1994: 402). Our work builds on this literature by addressing how social networks influence migration destinations at an individual level and community development at the collective level, both of which are relatively understudied issues.

## **Methodology**

The research materials were gathered using a comprehensive approach that combined both quantitative and qualitative studies that took place in 2020–2021. This was achieved through document analysis, expert interviews, in-depth interviews and a survey. The survey and in-depth interview study involved households in Armenia that had family members who had migrated to Russia. This mixed-methods approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the role of ethnic networks in shaping migratory routes and community construction among the Armenian diasporas. Based on our probability sample ( $n = 639$ ; 99 per cent confidence interval and 5 per cent margin of error) the sample size for the survey was calculated by considering the number of households in the Republic of Armenia as the sample frame. Of the 639 households, 390 participated in the survey (61 per cent), as only their family members emigrated to Russia.<sup>1</sup>

The response rate stands at 38.7 per cent. Some 40.2 per cent declined and, in 21.1 per cent of cases, the individual with any knowledge of emigration history was unavailable during the fieldwork. The multi-stage approach to identifying and selecting spatial clusters was applied. In the first stage, the stratification was done according to the capital city and other regions of Armenia, then according to Yerevan communities, regional cities and rural communities with probabilities proportional to their population size. In the second stage, households were randomly selected in each community. In each settlement, we calculated the number of routes (streets) for the sampling. Six households per route were selected and the starting points in the routes were selected systematically from the address directory based on the probability method. For our research, the survey was conducted in those households where there were migrant household members. In the third stage, in each selected household one adult household member, male or female, aged 18 or above, who claimed to be well-informed about the emigration history of their household members, was selected. The survey results indicated that 1 259 of the surveyed household members were migrants, of whom 61 per cent migrated to Russia.<sup>2</sup> We explored the migration paths and reasons of the ethnic networks involved in the migratory experience, as well as their role in facilitating migration and settlement. In the article, we highlighted the problem of community formation and migrants’ families’ perception of the role of migrants’ networks – therefore, our aims were of a descriptive nature.

Twenty interviewers, who had been trained about the objectives of our research, the sample composition and the questionnaire completion guidelines, conducted face-to-face interviews. These were administered using traditional pen-and-paper techniques.

In this study, we also used qualitative study materials: we conducted individual in-depth interviews with 123 households within 10 regions of Armenia that have migrant family members, of which 58 interviews were with households that had migrants living in Russia (13 interviews with people from 4 villages included in this research) between 2018 and 2021. We conducted in-depth interviews using the snowball method and the participants differed from those who took part in the quantitative survey. To avoid repetition, we included an additional question to ascertain whether the respondents had participated in a quantitative survey on the same topic. The participants were mainly interviewed in their homes and the interviews lasted around one hour and were conducted in Armenian and translated into English by the researchers. Qualitative research was chosen to give room for personal migratory stories, which enabled participants to give nuanced answers about their family members' migratory experiences and allowed the researchers to identify the issues and themes that are important in the research context. The purpose of the qualitative research conducted was to explore and understand people's ideas, approaches and experiences.

We conducted a thematic analysis of archival and academic materials related to the Soviet and post-Soviet periods of Armenian migration. Another important qualitative source was expert interviews conducted with 29 specialists such as members of the Parliament of the Republic of Armenia, experts working at the Migration Service of the Russian Federation, the Office of the Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs, heads of municipalities and academics (including demographers, statisticians, economists and diaspora experts).

Both in-depth interviews with migrants' family members and expert interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. The research process consisted of two main steps. Firstly, all interviews were transcribed and subsequently cleaned, sorted and formatted for analysis. In the second step, all transcripts and materials were reviewed repeatedly until the scope of the analysis was determined. The analytical approach employed for this research was an inductive one, moving from specific instances to broader generalisations. Through this method, semantic units or key concepts were identified and then organised into themes to derive meaning from the data. We used reflexivity as an active research stance to avoid stereotypical and clichéd portrayals of the researched groups and to maintain awareness of data collection as an active process in which the positions of both the researcher and the interviewee are socially constructed and embedded (Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz 2018).

One of the core ethical issues of social research is the principle of anonymity and confidentiality. Before conducting the interviews, we obtained informed consent from the participants to utilise the information they shared for research purposes, ensuring that their identities and personal details remained confidential and protected. Furthermore, after transcribing the interviews, the recordings were deleted to further protect the participants' identities. In addition to safeguarding anonymity, the research team strictly controlled access to the interview recordings. This measure ensured that only authorised individuals involved in the transcription process had access to the data, thereby reducing the risk of unauthorised disclosure.

Although respondents willingly cooperated and shared information, we had to be mindful of the concept of 'deductive disclosure' (Sieber 1994; Tolich 2004). This occurs when research participants can be recognised or identified in the research report. The risk of deductive disclosure is particularly pronounced when presenting detailed qualitative research about small communities and villages. While the research participants themselves may not be identifiable to the general public, individuals familiar with the community might still be able to recognise specific participants based on characteristics such as age group and migration stories. Therefore, the confidentiality of the participants was maintained by changing the names of participants when quoting them. Additionally, we de-identified villages and communities by using generic names such as Village 1, Village 2

etc. These measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality of the research participants and to uphold ethical standards throughout the study.

### The historical context of the Armenian presence in Russia

The Armenian community in Russia comprises diverse migration flows, which can be tentatively categorised into three groups: pre-Soviet migration, migration during the Soviet Union and post-Soviet migration (emerging after Armenia gained independence). Armenians have a longstanding migration history in Russia, with one of the earliest migration waves dating back to the 11th and 12th centuries during the time of Kievan Russia (Miqaelyan 2003).

The largest influx of Armenians into Russia in the pre-Soviet period occurred following the 1915 Genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire, as some of the Armenian survivors sought refuge in Russia's southern administrative centres and major cities. This group of forced migrants not only revitalised the pre-existing Armenian communities in Russia but also gave rise to new ones, thereby significantly increasing the Armenian population (Miqaelyan 2003). Until the 1920s, the life of Armenian communities in Russia was influenced by several Armenian organisations, whose activities and existence were later deemed unacceptable by the Soviet authorities and subsequently banned. These organisations were seen as tools for promoting social inequality and bourgeois ideology and of exerting influence (Aleqsanyan 2014).

The number of Armenians in Russia continued to increase after the formation of the Soviet Union in 1922. Under the common socio-economic and cultural policy implemented by the Soviet state, there was a notable influx of Armenians from Armenia and other Soviet republics to Russia. This trend is supported by statistical data on the national composition of Russia (Demoscope 1992, 2000, 2010), as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Armenians in Russia\***

Year	Number of people
1939	218,136
1959	255,978
1970	298,718
1979	364,570
1989	532,390
2002	1,130,491
2010	1,182,388
2021	946,172

Note: \*Population census 1939, 1959, 1970, 1979, 1989, 2002, 2010, 2020.

The statistics indicate that the number of Armenians in the Russian Federation almost doubled between 1959 and 1989. During the Soviet era, Armenians migrated to the Russian Federation for various reasons, including, *inter alia*, education, military service and state-sponsored labour opportunities etc. Notably, several Soviet republics, including Russia, were the primary destinations for Armenian seasonal migrants, many of whom eventually decided to settle there permanently.

Another significant migration wave occurred in 1988, following a catastrophic earthquake in Armenia which led to the evacuation of approximately 200,000 people from the affected zone to other former Soviet republics, including Russia (Yeganyan 2020). Although many of the evacuated individuals eventually returned

to Armenia after the region was rebuilt, around 50,000 people chose to remain in Russia and, over time, were joined by their family members and relatives. Additionally, between 1988 and 1992, the Armenian–Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh resulted in the deportation of about 420,000 refugees from Azerbaijan to Armenia (Yeganyan 2020). Due to the challenging socio-economic conditions and integration issues in Armenia, many of these refugees chose to emigrate from Armenia and primarily settled in Russia. These various migration waves have significantly contributed to the growth of the Armenian community in the Russian Federation.

Under the Soviet totalitarian system, the creation of ethnic or religious communities and their institutions was strictly prohibited. In official and academic publications concerning Armenians residing in Soviet republics other than Armenia, the term ‘diaspora’ was never used. This approach was ideologically driven, as Armenians, including those living in Soviet Armenia, were considered full citizens of the Soviet Union and an integral part of the entire country (Khachatryan, Ananyan, Sargsyan and Khudaverdyan 2003). During the Soviet era, the previously established Armenian community organisations in Russia experienced a gradual decline. Many Armenian schools and cultural centres were closed, Armenian periodicals ceased publication and the activities of the Armenian Church were banned.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of Armenia, there was a significant increase in the number of emigrants due to the socio-economic crisis in the country. Between 1992 and 1994, it is estimated that around 637,500 people, approximately 18 per cent of Armenia’s population, emigrated from the country. However, in the following years, from 1995 to 2001, the rate of emigration decreased to about 250,000 people or approximately 7.0 per cent of the population (Yeganyan 2020). Between 2002 and 2007, the number of emigrants from Armenia decreased to approximately 150,000 people (Yeganyan 2020). Subsequently, based on a survey conducted by the International Organization for Migration in collaboration with the National Statistical Service of Armenia, the number of emigrants from 2008 to 2013 remained at around 35,000 people each year (Yeganyan 2020). From 2014 to 2016, migration rates increased, with approximately 44,300 people leaving the country. However, the numbers started to decrease again in 2017, with 24,000 migrants, followed by 18 286 migrants in 2018 and 15,400 in 2019.

According to Yeganyan (2020), from 1988 to 2019, the net balance of external migration in Armenia resulted in a negative figure of 1,600,000 to 1,700,000 people, with the majority of these movements (87.8 per cent) directed towards the Russian Federation (Armstat 2020). These migration patterns reflect the varying economic and social conditions in Armenia and the influence of factors such as employment opportunities and living standards in shaping migration trends over the years.

The interplay of the restrictive policy and the past shared association with the same country – the Soviet Union – as well as the ongoing influx of Armenians, had a profound impact on the Armenian community in Russia. These factors set it apart from other Armenian diasporic communities, often referred to as ‘victim’ diasporas with well-established transnational organisational structures (e.g., the Armenian Revolutionary Federation<sup>3</sup> and the Armenian General Benevolent Union<sup>4</sup> etc.). The unique circumstances in Russia contributed to shaping the Armenian community in a distinctive manner, resulting in noticeable differences when compared to the traditional diaspora communities found in countries such as France, the United States, Lebanon, Syria and others.

### **Migrant networks as drivers of post-Soviet Armenian migration**

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the war with neighbouring Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 1990s put Armenia into a severe socio-economic crisis, which subsequently led to increased emigration from the country. As indicated by the participants in our survey, the main reasons for migration were



overwhelmingly related to the high level of unemployment and lack of job opportunities, cited by 81 per cent of respondents as their family members' primary motives for migration. However, it is essential to note that these factors alone are not sufficient to drive migratory processes. The implementation of the migratory decision is significantly influenced by interpersonal ties and ethnic networks. According to our survey results, 37.7 per cent of respondents mentioned the existence of kinship and friendship networks as the primary reason for their family members to choose Russia as the destination country for migration. Among them, 29.3 per cent stated that these networks were composed of family members and relatives, while 12.6 per cent mentioned non-relatives, such as friends and acquaintances, as part of their migration networks. Additionally, some respondents highlighted Russia's attractive socio-economic conditions, including job markets, language skills and more, as reasons for considering it as a migration destination (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Reasons for choosing Russia as a destination country**

Factors	Per cent
Presence of family members, relatives	37.7
Job opportunity/offer	27.4
Easy country entry	13.8
Presence of friends, acquaintances	12.6
Knowledge of the language	11.0
Previous working, military service experience or previous visits in Russia	8.7
Marriage	8.5
Availability of property/business	2.3
Russia's prospective opportunities	2.1
Other factors	2.7
Difficult to answer	2.1

Source: Quantitative study conducted in 2020–2021, n=639.

Note: multiple choice: respondents were allowed to choose multiple answers.

Moreover, in response to the direct question of whether the existence of ethnic networks influenced their decision to migrate to Russia, 66.2 per cent of respondents confirmed that their relatives or friends living in Russia played a significant role in their family members' decision-making process. These quantitative findings were further confirmed by qualitative interviews. A 62-year-old man, whose son migrated to Russia 10 years ago, shared his experience:

*My son was working for a private company, then that company closed down and my son became unemployed. He was looking for a job for several months but could not find one, so he decided to leave the country and migrated to Krasnoyarsk where his sister lives. His sister's family helped him to find a job. He stayed at his sister's house for about a year. Then, when he started earning well, he took his wife and children with him to Krasnoyarsk.*

The experts also concurred that networks of relatives, friends and families play a crucial role in driving emigration from Armenia. One expert, a scholar at Yerevan State University who specialises in migration issues, shared his opinion on the matter:

*The likelihood of emigrating from Armenia is influenced by the presence of contacts abroad. Individuals who have close connections, such as friends living in other countries, tend to have a stronger desire to emigrate compared to those without any such contacts. However, it is essential to acknowledge that other factors, such as the profile of the destination country and its immigration policies, also contribute to the migration decision-making process.*

Regarding the reasons for selecting specific countries as migration destinations, this specialist from the Office of the Chief Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs of the Republic of Armenia emphasised the significance of Armenian communities' existence abroad.

*Why are some countries chosen as a destination for emigration or why are they popular? One of the reasons for this is the presence of Armenian communities in the selected countries, the presence of the Armenian environment and the presence of connections that make it easier for emigration. It allows migrants to quickly adapt to new environments, find a job and know people to whom they can turn in case of need: this is, of course, a factor and a circumstance that plays a role.*

Ethnic networks not only help to reduce the costs and risks associated with relocating migrants from Armenia but also assist in overcoming the challenges which migrants face in the destination country. Regarding the multiple-choice question 'Please indicate on which issues migrants received support', the survey results revealed that 49.2 per cent of the participants mentioned that their family members found a job in the Russian Federation with the help of their networks, 39.5 per cent found accommodation, 33.1 per cent made new acquaintances, 30.3 per cent lived with a supporting person for some time, 24.4 per cent received financial support, 24.4 per cent received support with documentation in Russia (and 6.9 per cent in Armenia) and 13.8 per cent received assistance in organising their migration process.

The pivotal role of social networks was also emphasised during the in-depth interviews. For instance, a 52-year-old woman shared how her nephew played a significant role in facilitating the emigration of her son and his family.

*My son got married and was expecting his first child. He worked in the power grid but became unemployed due to layoffs. After that, he was constantly thinking about leaving Armenia and finding work abroad. I was very worried because he had never left Armenia before and had never even boarded a plane – and on top of that, his wife was pregnant. I discussed the situation with my nephew, who also lived in Russia. He assured me that all we needed to do was get a plane ticket for my son and his wife and he would help him with everything once they arrived. When I heard that, I felt relieved because my son's family would not be alone there.*

The survey also explored the relationship between migrants and their supporting networks. The findings indicate that a significant majority (78.1 per cent) reported that their family members rely on relatives (including mother/father, son/daughter, son-/daughter-in-law, brother/sister and other relatives) who have already established themselves in the Russian Federation – such as parents, siblings or children, as reported by the migrants' family members. For the remaining participants, the necessary resources were provided by non-family ties, such as friends, colleagues or acquaintances.

Table 3 lists the percentage of supporting individuals who moved from Armenia to the Russian Federation between 1940 and 2020. From these data, we can conclude that migration from Armenia to Russia was predominantly facilitated by migrants who settled in Russia during the post-Soviet period. However, the survey

also indicates that there are migration ties formed during the Soviet period that continue to play a significant role in the migratory process.

**Table 3. Migrants' ties with the person supporting the migrant**

Supporting people	Per cent
Mother/father	11.3
Son/daughter	2.6
Son-/daughter-in-law	2.3
Brother/sister	21.1
Friends	23.0
Colleague	5.3
Other relatives (uncle, aunt, cousins)	40.8
Acquaintance/ neighbour	7.5
Other	1.5

Source: Quantitative study conducted in 2020–2021, n=639.

Note: multiple choice: respondents were allowed to choose multiple answers.

During the interviews, the intergenerational connections that influenced migration from Armenia were frequently revealed. For instance, in an interview with a 38-year-old man, the persistence of networks over generations and their impact on migration routes from Armenia was highlighted:

*My grandfather's brother served in the Soviet army in Russia from 1978 to 1980. After completing his service, he decided to stay in Russia and pursue further studies at a military institute. Eventually, he married an Armenian girl. In 1991–1992, when the economic situation in Armenia deteriorated, he reached out to my grandfather and invited him to join him in one of the villages in the Leningrad region. There, my grandfather found work in construction. After labouring for 5 years, he made the decision to bring his family over. First, my parents left and then 2 or 3 years later, my other brother and his family also emigrated. I chose not to go because I was able to start a small business with the money sent from there.*

Based on the research results, we can confirm that ethnic networks play a crucial role in meeting the needs of Armenian migrants and facilitating their settlement in the new environment. These networks enable migrants to receive essential information, materials and non-material support, all through the formal and informal connections established by relatives, friends and acquaintances who had already migrated to the destination country before the newcomers' arrival. A well-known Russian saying, 'Do not have a hundred rubles but have a hundred friends', illustrates the significance of social networks in this context. The pioneer migrants, as the creators and maintainers of these social networks, serve as a valuable resource for newcomers, influencing the shaping of migration routes and experiences.

### Mapping the sub-community routes: qualitative evidence

While several authors (e.g., Ambrosini 2017; Bakewell *et al.* 2012) have studied the implications of networked migration on the development of migration routes and cost reduction, its impact on the community-building process has been relatively overlooked. Our qualitative research indicates that the establishment of new

Armenian communities in Russia is notably shaped by the ethnic networks of migrants. Essentially, when an individual migrates, it opens up opportunities for other members of the same ethnic and kinship network to engage in the migration process. The insights shared by the experts we interviewed, such as this specialist from the Office of the RA High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs, further support the idea that ethnic networks play a crucial role in activating migration routes to specific destinations.

*There are established communities in Russia, including rural communities, that consist of people who have migrated from specific geographical locations or regions of Armenia. In many cases, it appears as though an entire community or village from Armenia has been compactly relocated to one region of Russia. Community, friendship and kinship ties play a significant role in these cases, as the presence of a community in the destination country becomes a crucial factor that drives migration in that direction.*

Our study has identified several routes that have served as sources of migration and later contributed to community development. In this study, we focus on 4 specific community routes from Village 1 (in the Tavush province in Armenia) to Moscow, from Village 2 (in the Shirak province in Armenia) to Yakutsk, from Village 3 (in the Gegharkunik region) to Nizhniy Novgorod and from Village 4 (in the Gegharkunik region) to Omsk.

Our qualitative research reveals that Armenians from Village 1 have established a sub-community in Moscow: former villagers have set up both formal and informal family, patriotic and business organisations. These networks not only contribute to the regular operation and development of the formal and informal community structure but also compete for the expansion of economic resources, business and cultural spheres of influence with other Armenian groups (such as Armenians from Syunik, Gyumri, etc.). Frequently, these organisations lack a formal structure – unlike traditional diaspora organisations, where each member's role, rights and responsibilities are clearly defined and relationships are based on formal impersonal ties. These Armenian organisations rely mostly on informal networks and personalised connections, where the reputation of a co-ethnic person plays a crucial role in unifying the network. The ethnic networks, originating from their former village, have significant mobilisation potential, even in assisting their homeland and contributing to the development of their former village in Armenia. A 57-year-old woman from Village 1 shared the story of her brother's family, where informal networks of former villagers came together to mobilise and help their home community.

*They migrated to Moscow in 1993 because our relatives helped them with the move. Our relatives had a construction business there and had good connections with some officials working in the Russian government. The people from Tavush who live abroad often assist each other in various matters, as many of them are friends and relatives. There are many individuals from our village and Tavush, in general, living in Moscow and they never forget about us [the people who stayed in the village]; they always support our native village in meaningful ways. For instance, our people in Moscow [former residents of Village 1] collected money and sent it to the village development fund, while people from our neighbouring villages also contributed to repairing the school and the water tank.*

According to our research, another migratory route has been established since the 1970s, with people from Village 2, in the Shirak region, primarily emigrating to the Republic of Sakha-Yakutia – and specifically to the city of Yakutsk. In-depth interviews revealed that the Tsarvshyan family from Village 2 were among the first labour migrants to settle in Yakutsk. Their assistance and facilitation resulted in about 20 families from the village moving and settling in Yakutsk within a few years.

According to representatives from the Village 2 municipality, approximately 4,000 migrants from Village 2 have settled in Sakha-Yakutia, leading to the colloquial reference of Yakutsk as ‘the second Village 2’. Notably, there are businessmen from Village 2 in Yakutsk, one of whom, as shared by Village 2 residents, employs about 700 labour migrants annually, many of whom stay permanently in Yakutsk. Philanthropic activities, such as providing financial support, are common and recurring practices in this community.

During our interviews, many residents of Village 2 mentioned that their relatives chose Yakutsk not by chance but because they had pre-existing connections with the region. For example, Grigor, a 60-year-old man, shared the story of his brother – who migrated to Yakutsk in the 1990s – and reflected on his family’s experience:

*My brother’s decision to settle in Yakutsk from Village 2 was not accidental, as our family has had connections with the region since the 1970s. My grandfather was one of the first migrant workers to go there during that period and, later, my father continued the family’s business, establishing a significant construction company in Yakutsk. Many people from our village now live and work in Sakha-Yakutia. We maintain strong connections with them and I frequently see many of our relatives there. They gather and celebrate various events, such as birthdays and holidays. In Yakutsk, our former neighbours and my brother live side by side. Those who left the village have not abandoned their houses; instead, they have renovated them because they often return in the summer with their children. Moreover, most of the migrants living in Yakutsk not only maintain close ties with their village but also contribute financially to improve amenities in the village, such as repairing drinking-water pipes, schools and roads.*

From Village 3, in the Gegharkunik region, three generations have already emigrated to regions where their grandparents settled since the early 1970s. Our research reveals that their main migration destinations include the Nizhny Novgorod, Tyumen and Yekaterinburg regions of the Russian Federation. In Nizhny Novgorod alone, approximately 400 families from Village 3 have settled permanently, with around 200 families in the Tyumen region and 120 families in Yekaterinburg. The emigrants from Village 3 have played a significant role in the formation of Armenian communities in these regions of Russia. Notably, the first settlers accumulated wealth and established large construction companies in these cities, which contributed to the establishment of Armenian community organisations. During an interview, a 47-year-old female resident from Village 3 shared her thoughts about the migration situation in their village and the community in Nizhny Novgorod:

*Most of our villagers have migrated to Russia and many families from our village have settled in Nizhny Novgorod. My brother also lives there with his family and is engaged in trade. There are wealthy former residents of Village 3 who are actively involved in the Armenian community and utilise their connections with the local administration for the development of the community. They also provide assistance to underprivileged families in our village.*

The 60-year-old headmaster of the Village 3 school shared the story of the migration routes, their organisational basis and the philanthropic and charity activities and development projects led by these organisations. The interview highlights how migrants have developed diasporic organisations and used their ability to mobilise fellow diaspora members for common causes, leading to organised action driven by ties of co-responsibility (Werbner 2002).

*I have been the headmaster of this school for 20 years and I am very aware of the families from our village who settled in Russia and the children who left school. They left our village to work abroad in Russia back in the Soviet period and were mainly engaged in construction. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the worsening economic situation in Armenia, the number of expatriate workers increased dramatically. At first, men went, then they took their families for permanent residence and established a compact settlement in the Russian Federation. In order to preserve the Armenianness of the children and teach them their native language and history, they gathered with local Armenians and started a Sunday School there. They always celebrate our national and religious holidays. Due to the direct support of the people from our village engaged in business in Russia and the connections with the local authorities, they created patriotic charitable and cultural associations, collected money to build a church and published a newspaper in the Armenian language.*

About 40,000 Armenians currently reside in the Omsk region of Russia. During an interview in Village 4, the former head of the Armenian community in Omsk shared how he had been leading construction brigades of about 20–30 people from Armenia to Omsk for many years, starting in the 1970s. Eventually, he settled in Omsk permanently and relocated his family and relatives to the region. He played a vital role in uniting the local Armenians and establishing an informal Armenian migrants' network. Through his efforts, he later successfully registered a cultural centre, a Sunday school and an Armenian Apostolic Church. As one 70-year-old woman interviewed from Village 4 recounted, her son was also among the migrants who left the country due to these ethnic networks:

*My son decided to permanently move from Village 4 to the Omsk region because he was unemployed in our village. My cousin suggested that he join him, as he owns a chain of shops there and is actively involved in Armenian community organisations in Omsk. Upon my son's arrival, they quickly found a job for him within the same chain and he declared that living there is very comfortable since many former residents from our and neighbouring villages have settled in Omsk as well. Moreover, my grandchildren are already attending dance and vocal classes and are learning about Armenian history in Omsk.*

Currently, the Armenian community in Omsk is not homogeneous, as it comprises people from different villages and cities of the Gegharkunik region. Consequently, the community has developed its intra-community structure, where distinct intra-ethnic groups have formed family and business networks. An illustration of this diversity is evident in the leadership transition within the Armenian community in Omsk, where the former head was succeeded by a businessman from the Gegharkunik region. According to the former head of the Armenian community in Omsk, approximately 15,000 Armenians residing in Omsk originate from Gegharkunik and this change in leadership reflects their significant presence in the community.

In 2016, after the elections in Armenia, the governor of Omsk visited the Gegharkunik region with a delegation, which included the head of the Armenian community. This visit led to the signing of a memorandum of cooperation between Omsk and Gegharkunik and the head of the community received a diploma from the governor of Gegharkunik in recognition of his contributions. Subsequently, in 2022, a delegation from Gegharkunik, headed by the governor, made an official visit to the Omsk region, where they met with members of the Armenian community, as this woman aged 51 explains:

*Many families from our village, Village 4, now reside in Omsk. It feels as if our village is divided, with one part here and the other part in Russia. This connection has formed our diaspora – and the community there, along with its leadership, maintains strong ties with the village. Whenever the village is in need, they*

*provide direct help; this was especially evident when we were building a church. A fundraiser was organised and the list of participants was proudly displayed on the door of the village hall.*

The cases discussed above illustrate that contemporary Armenian communities in Russia do not rely solely on old and well-established traditional institutions that were developed in historical diaspora settings (e.g., the Armenian Revolutionary Federation). Instead, they have given rise to recently developed organisations, often operating through informal networks. These newly formed communities and organisations carry Armenian names (e.g., AniArmenia) which are often related to significant historical events (e.g., Sardarapat) or the birthplace of a benefactor (e.g., Tashir).

In their homeland engagement strategies, these groups, based on regional origin, compete to elect community leaders. The preservation of traditions, culture and language remains a primary goal for these organisations, though it is not their exclusive focus. Another vital aspect of their activities revolves around their cooperation with state authorities, lobbying efforts, fundraising and various forms of mediation on behalf of their fellow countrymen.

## **Conclusion**

We propose that diaspora studies and migration studies can greatly benefit from exploring the Armenian diaspora experience, particularly by examining the actual trajectories of migrants arriving in their destination countries and how both migrants and their descendants establish networks and foster communities based on ethnic ties. Our study contributes to the existing literature on migration and diaspora studies in 3 significant ways. Firstly, it sheds light on the enduring nature of networks across generations, demonstrating how Armenian migration networks have evolved since the era of the Soviet Union. Secondly, it highlights how migrants' kinship networks play a crucial role in shaping the organisational foundations of these communities, with leadership roles often emerging from sub-community networks based on the regions of origin of the migrants. Thirdly, our research delves into the engagement preferences of the diaspora, illustrating the willingness of recently formed communities to actively connect with their specific regions or villages of origin.

The quantitative research findings suggest that the survey participants considered their networks abroad as a crucial factor in their decision to emigrate. The study reveals that ethnic networks significantly influence the migration strategies of migrants from different villages and regions in Armenia when selecting their destination in Russia. Each group is likely to have its distinct migratory direction and favoured locations for permanent residence within the Russian Federation, shaped by their unique migration strategies. While a particular region of the country might be well-known and preferred by one group of migrants, it may not hold the same appeal for others. As a result of these migration strategies, different families and individuals from the same Armenian place of origin settle in distinct regions of the Russian Federation in a compact manner. The successful migration of pioneer migrants has a ripple effect, influencing the decision-making of potential emigrants from Armenia and leading to the expansion of migration flows.

This research sheds light on the role of ethnic networks within Armenian communities in Russia and provides insight into the enduring nature of ethnic ties that persist over generations between home communities and destination countries. It demonstrates that Armenian migrants have established strong connections since the Soviet era, shaping the migratory behaviour and destinations of their family members, relatives and fellow community members back in Armenia.

The study emphasises the significance of ethnic identity as a crucial factor in shaping and sustaining diaspora communities. The organisational basis of the communities that are founded on ethnic networks often differs from transnational traditional diasporic organisations as they often rely on personal relationships

between co-ethnic individuals. They play a role in consolidating and accumulating resources within communities, as well as aiding their home communities. The presence of ethnic groups and their networks serves as a significant economic, social and cultural resource in Russia. Some cases also demonstrate that these networks or organisations act as hometown associations, not only mobilising resources to build communities in destination countries but also providing direct material and non-material support to the regions, cities and villages in their home countries. Their attachment to specific regions of origin is a distinct feature of post-Soviet migration that sets it apart from traditional diasporas, as the latter typically consist of third-generation Armenians who have become disconnected from their original communities in Armenia. In contrast, the newly established Armenian communities in the Russian Federation maintain a strong connection with their places of origin. This bond is reinforced by the fact that many of their family members and relatives continue to reside there. As a result, these migrants actively engage in direct financial investments to foster the growth and development of their communities of origin, as well as to support the implementation of various new projects.

This article also highlights the necessity for further research to enhance our understanding of the relationships between ethnic networks and diaspora formation ties. It suggests focusing on several understudied aspects of migrants' sub-communities based on kinship and friendship networks, including identity politics, organisational foundations built on formal and informal networks, engagement priorities and practices, connections and disconnections with their homelands. Additionally, the study can analyse and compare other diasporic migration and sub-community networks with the case of Armenian post-Soviet migration, such as the Turkish, Mexican and Chinese diasporas.

In our study, it is important to acknowledge the limitation regarding not fully capturing the perspectives and experiences of individuals from the older diaspora or those who migrated with their entire families. This limitation could impact on our findings, as these groups may hold unique insights and varied migration experiences. Future research should consider broader inclusion criteria to encompass a more diverse range of migrants and diaspora members.

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No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Notes

1. There were 763 584 households in the Republic of Armenia according to the 2011 census (Armstat 2011).
2. The geography of emigration from Armenia is quite comprehensive, encompassing 35 countries, as indicated by these research findings. The primary destinations and their respective percentages are as follows: the Russian Federation (61.0 per cent), the USA (9.2 per cent), Germany (7.2 per cent), France with (4.9 per cent), Spain and Ukraine (2.7 per cent each) and Belgium and Greece (1.3 per cent each). Additionally, Poland received 1.1 per cent of the emigrants. Other countries such as China, Georgia, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, Canada, Turkey, Belarus, England, Abkhazia, Switzerland, the UAE, India, Bulgaria, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Austria, Mexico, Ireland, Syria, Israel, Turkmenistan, Italy, Latvia, Cyprus, Denmark and Liberia had emigration rates below 1.0 per cent.
3. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation has been a transnational organisation since its inception in 1890, with established affiliates in more than 20 countries (Tölölyan 2000).
4. The Armenian General Benevolent Union was established in Cairo, Egypt, in 1906 as a non-profit organisation and is currently present in 31 countries (AGBU 2021).

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