

The influence of diaspora on democracy-building processes

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I Introduction

The Global Campus of Human Rights is a worldwide network of universities that jointly organise seven regional Master's programmes in Human Rights and Democracy. These Master's programmes are coordinated by universities in Buenos Aires (for Latin America and the Caribbean); Pretoria (for Africa); Bangkok (for Asia and the Pacific); Beirut (for the Arab world); Sarajevo (for South-East Europe); and Yerevan (for the Caucasus region). The organisational hub of the Global Campus is the European Inter-University Centre for Human Rights and Democratisation (EIUC), which coordinates the European Master's programme and which is based in an old monastery on the Lido of Venice. Whenever I travel from the Lido to Venice, I pass by the Island San Lazzaro Degli Armeni in the middle of the Venetian Lagoon, which has for some 300 years been occupied by Mechitarists, an Armenian Catholic congregation. The monastery has at its disposal a large collection of books, journals, artifacts, and the third-largest collection of Armenian manuscripts. Over the centuries numerous artists, writers and political and religious leaders have visited the island, the most notable being Lord Byron.

Although I have been based as Secretary-General of EIUC in Venice since 2010, I never visited San Lazzaro. However, when I left Venice two days ago to travel to Yerevan in order to discuss in our Global Classroom the influence of diaspora on democracy-building processes, I decided to soon pay a visit to this Venetian island, which is one of the best-known historic sites of the Armenian diaspora.

The word 'diaspora' originates from the Greek language and refers to dispersed peoples. For many centuries, the term diaspora was associated primarily with the Jewish diaspora, a people dispersed all over the world. The first Jewish ghetto was established in Venice, which underlines the

* Secretary-General, European Inter-University Centre for Human and Rights and Democratisation. Opening address, Global Classroom, Yerevan State University, 23 April 2018.

special relationship between the phenomenon of diaspora and the seat of the Global Campus. Today, diaspora is usually defined as a community of people that live outside their shared country of origin or ancestry and who maintain active connections with it. There are different reasons why people live in diaspora, ranging from poverty and voluntary migration for economic, political, cultural, professional, social or other reasons, to armed conflicts, persecution, forced displacement, ethnic cleansing and even genocide. People living in diaspora are migrants, refugees, displaced people as well as their descendants. They may still have kept citizenship of their countries of origin or may have acquired another citizenship, thereby losing their original citizenship. However, they need to maintain active economic, social, cultural, political or personal connections with their countries of origin in order to be considered diaspora. Most importantly, they must identify with their country of origin. This subjective element often makes it difficult to provide precise statistical data about the diaspora of a given country.

At a time when global migration is on the increase and the number of refugees is higher than in any other year since the end of World War II, the number of people living in diaspora is also sharply on the rise. Over the last 45 years the total number of people living outside their country of origin has tripled from 76 million to roughly 232 million, which constitutes more than 3 per cent of the current world population. The phenomenon of diaspora, therefore, is closely linked to the concepts of transnationalism and transmigration.

The roughly 20 monks living on the Venetian island of San Lazzaro Degli Armeni only constitute a small part of the Armenian diaspora. Altogether, there are some 11 million Armenians, but only roughly 3 million actually live in the Republic of Armenia. This means that more than two-thirds of Armenians live in diaspora: more than one million in Russia, and large numbers in the United States (mainly in California), France, Iran, Georgia, Lebanon and Argentina. The reasons for the Armenian diaspora are manifold, but the genocide against the Armenians of 1915 definitely plays a crucial role. Tomorrow, on 24 April, we will visit the Genocide Memorial and Museum and thereby join the Armenian people in commemorating the first genocide of the twentieth century, which still plays a decisive role in the political lives and culture of Armenians.

In terms of size and diaspora, Armenia may be compared to two other countries, which host regional Master's programmes of the Global Campus of Human Rights. Bosnia and Herzegovina has some 3,5 million inhabitants and a diaspora of roughly 2 million people. Most of them live in the United States, in Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Austria, Australia and New Zealand. While many Bosnians emigrated for economic reasons, the most important single event causing displacement were the armed conflicts, ethnic cleansing operations and the genocide against Bosnian Muslims between 1992 and 1995.

With some 4 million inhabitants, Lebanon is only slightly bigger than Armenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the Lebanese diaspora is estimated to range between 8 and 16 million people (two to four times the number of Lebanese living in their own country), of which up to 7 million live in Brazil. Even the current President of Brazil, Michel Temer, is the son of Lebanese immigrants. Other larger Lebanese communities live in

Argentina, Colombia, the United States, Venezuela, Australia, Mexico and Canada. While historically trade-related, the recent increase in the Lebanese diaspora has been caused primarily by the Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990. The majority of the Lebanese diaspora are Christians, others are Muslims, Druze and Jewish.

While these three countries clearly stand out in terms of scale of their respective diaspora communities, other countries hosting regional Master's programmes of the Global Campus can also reference – although much smaller in numbers – diasporas. Thailand has a population of more than 50 million and a diaspora of 2,7 million, 1,5 million of which are in Vietnam and the rest based in the United States, South Korea, Australia, Taiwan and Germany. South Africa with 55 million inhabitants has only 600 000 people living in diaspora (200 000 of whom are based in the United Kingdom, 145 000 in Australia, and the rest in the United States, New Zealand and Canada).

The economic impact of the diaspora has been well researched. In the three countries of the Global Campus with a comparatively large diaspora, the remittances by members of the diaspora to their relatives at home constitute a substantial proportion of the national economy: in Armenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina roughly 15 per cent of the countries' economies, in Lebanon as high as 18 per cent.

Less well researched is the influence of the diaspora on democracy-building processes. Many questions arise in this regard. Do members of the diaspora enjoy the right to vote and to be elected in their countries of origin? Do they have a right to form and join political parties? In most countries the right to vote is restricted to citizens, which means that members of the diaspora who have lost their citizenship also lost their right to vote. Even with respect to members of the diaspora who remain citizens, many countries restrict the right to vote to citizens who actually reside in their countries, thus excluding the diaspora. On the other hand, out-of-country voting is on the increase. Is it at all desirable if the diaspora is actively involved in the democratic decision making of their countries of origin? One may argue that countries with a large diaspora may have gone through difficult political transition processes in which they might be in need of democratic assistance by their compatriots abroad. However, diaspora also often are inherently conservative in their outlook and may have a restrictive influence on the political process. If the diaspora significantly contributes to the economic growth, wealth and stability of their countries of origin, then the diaspora might also wish to contribute to the political and democratic development and good governance. This may entail active participation in elections, in political parties, in the media and in government. Does this mean that election campaigning should reach out to the diaspora communities, as we have recently witnessed with respect to Turkish politicians campaigning in Germany and Austria? Let us imagine the huge Italian diaspora in the United States, in Argentina and other parts of the world getting actively involved in Italian politics. What are the limits of legitimate interests of the diaspora to get involved in democratic decision-making processes in their home country? Is it a good idea to set up a special Ministry dealing with the diaspora, as in Armenia? What is the proper function of such a ministry of diaspora?

These and many related questions will be discussed by students and professors of the Global Classroom during the coming days at Yerevan

State University. The Global Campus of Human Rights is a network of some 100 universities in all world regions. But even in the seven countries, where the coordinating universities of our Master's programmes are located, I identified three countries with a comparatively large diaspora population, which in Armenia and Lebanon even outnumber the inhabitants at home. Other countries in which our partner universities coordinate Master's programmes, such as Argentina, are classical immigration countries that host large diaspora populations from other countries, including from Armenia and Lebanon.

The fact that this Global Classroom takes place in Yerevan at a time when the Armenian people are in the middle of democratic changes which might soon result in something like a 'velvet revolution', makes this Global Classroom particularly interesting. To what extent is the widespread Armenian diaspora actively involved in these democratic movements and demonstrations, which we have all witnessed this morning and during previous days? If so, does it have a positive influence on the building of democracy in this tiny post-Soviet republic? Or should the influence of the diaspora be qualified as illegitimate interference in the domestic affairs of the Armenian people actually living in their home country?

No other academic network of students and professors would be better qualified to discuss these important and highly topical questions than the Global Classroom, one of the regular joint activities of our Global Campus of Human Rights. I very much look forward to our discussions in the coming days, which will address these issues from a global and comparative perspective.