

# DIASPORA

*Reading time ~ 8 min.*

When thinking about various diasporas around the world, we should remember the following three points.

## **Point 1 – Immigrants often acquire new personalities and identities.**

A common trait of almost all diasporas, from Greek and Irish to Italian or Armenian, is that most people emigrate from poor countries to rich countries (or economies). We can be more diplomatic and refer to poor countries as “emerging or developing” and to rich countries as “advanced or developed”, but the brutal reality is best described with two simple words – poor and rich.

Once settled in their new place of residence, most immigrants tend to be perplexed by their oxymoronic reality. On one hand, they are among the poorest and least accomplished members of their new society (they don't yet have the best paying jobs, don't fluently speak the language, don't yet have the connections and so on). On the other hand, they are suddenly richer than most of their compatriots back home. They can afford to help their relatives, even become philanthropists (in a sense), by sacrificing a modest percentage of their earnings. They start to live in a dual reality.

This confusing condition of being simultaneously rich and poor can last many years. During this time people change, sometimes drastically. Therefore, when we talk about diasporas, we need to understand that it is a dynamically changing group of people. This applies to any diaspora – the Russian diaspora, which emigrated to France during the 1917 revolution, or the one, which started to emigrate to various countries around the world after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Since most rich countries have mature legal systems and developed markets – labour markets, financial markets or commercial markets – all immigrants are quickly forced to adapt to new realities, rules and regulations. They acquire new values and often change their set of beliefs or convictions. All this means that the gap between the newly forming diaspora and its homeland continuously widens.

Although personalities and identities form at an early age, and rarely change thereafter, psychologists have noticed that sharp increases in stress can significantly alter people's personalities (and identities), even at a mature age. Emigration is an example of extreme stress and often changes people's identities and value systems. Some immigrants fail to adapt and end up having all sorts of identity crises, which last till the end of their lives.

Therefore, two powerful forces interact to significantly alter or mold emigrants into immigrants. Firstly, rules and regulations of their host country force them to become more disciplined, careful, cautious and calculating. Secondly, the extreme emotional stress caused by the uncertainty of the immigration process makes people more willing and open to change.

## **Point 2 – Dysfunctional systems force people to cultivate relationships.**

When people emigrate from one rich country to another, they are rarely referred to as immigrants and they don't form strong diasporas. For example, around 10% of Canada's population lives outside of Canada, yet who has ever heard of a Canadian diaspora? More than ten million Americans live outside of the U.S., yet there are no



American diasporas to speak of. Are there any English diasporas around the world? Why don't immigrants from rich countries form diasporas?

There are two explanations. First, countries such as Britain have effective institutions (healthcare insurance, rule of law, functional local government structures, to name a few), and most people can take care of themselves most of the time; their immigrant siblings abroad are unlikely to earn more than the British earn at home; borders and communications are open; so why form a diaspora? What would be the *raison d'être* of that diaspora?

The second explanation is that in functional countries people don't need each other as much. In dysfunctional countries, with corrupt institutions, people need each other because the system "I do for you and you do for me" works best. Because of this, people are "encouraged" to cultivate relationships and help each other. That is why dysfunctional countries have stronger diasporas and more "friendships". In functional countries systems replace friendships.

There are a few special cases, or exceptions, such as Israel, Northern Ireland or Armenia, which once were, or still are, under a threat of war or extermination. These countries give their diasporas around the world a very powerful reason to unite. But having a reason to unite and actually uniting are two very different concepts.

### Point 3 – Nationality vs ethnicity.

It is hard to understand the true nature of any diaspora without considering the concepts of *nationality* and *ethnicity*. This discussion becomes even more complicated when translated into various languages or debated in different cultures.

In one of our previous reports<sup>1</sup> we had argued that many people in developing countries have trouble understanding and accepting the principle that citizenship and nationality are essentially identical notions. Countries which continue to emphasize the concepts of ethnicity, race or religion instead of nationality and citizenship are undoubtedly headed for disastrous scenarios.

For example, Armenians born and raised in France, are they more French or Armenian? By ethnicity they are Armenian, but by nationality they are French. The grandchildren of Italians who emigrated to the US in early 1900s might not even be able to live in today's Italy, if they decided to move back. We must clearly distinguish, therefore, between the concepts of ethnicity and nationality.

### Conclusion

Diaspora is a constantly changing and evolving group of very different people. Many diaspora members haven't really thought about the complex issues of personality, identity, nationality or ethnicity. What they say in various sociological surveys may be completely different from how they behave.

Ethnicity is not a sustainable force or reason to unite people. So how can a country such as Armenia bond its diasporas, scattered around the globe, and try to use their power for mutual benefit? Given all the intricacies and complexities mentioned above, there seems to be only one way – Armenia must become what John Winthrop<sup>2</sup> called "the shining city upon a hill."

It is clear that many immigrants are embarrassed by their country of origin. Americans of Italian or Irish origin associate themselves with Italy or Ireland much more readily than Americans of Pakistani origin associate themselves with Pakistan. This is a very sensitive issue to discuss, but if we want to understand diasporas and figure out how to work with them, how to attract them and how to create a mutually beneficial relationship, we should put political correctness and empty rhetoric aside, at least for a while.

<sup>1</sup> [People Vote with Their Feet](#)

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Winthrop](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Winthrop)

The only way to unite Armenians around the world and connect them with the state of Armenia is to have a civilised, just, respectable, prosperous and modern Armenian state, which plays the role of a bonding magnet. It should be cool and prestigious to be Armenian, the rest will happen automatically. How Armenia can become that “shining city upon a hill” has been and will continue to be discussed in our insights.

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