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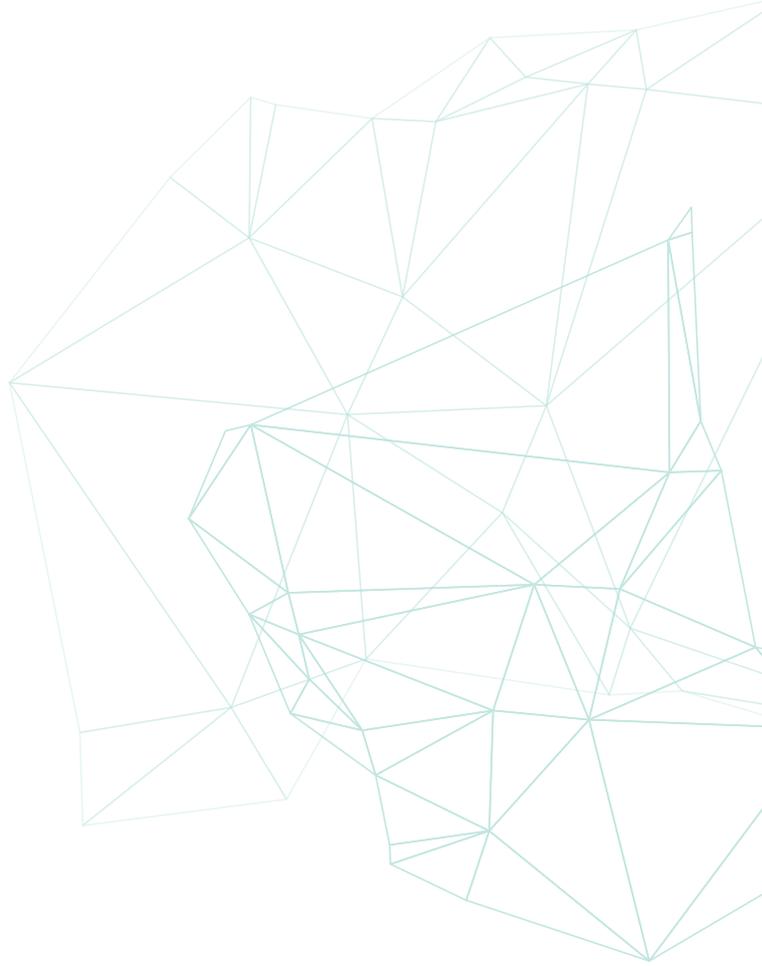
# Armenian Labor Migrants in Istanbul: Reality Check

Report by  
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# PART I

## Subject and Purpose

This paper is a descriptive report about the realities of the Armenian labor migrants in Istanbul. With the absence of open borders, diplomatic relations, formal economic ties and compromising historical narratives between the Armenian and Turkish states the report finds the situation of Armenian labor migrants in Istanbul to be of particular precariousness, volatility and vulnerability.

The purpose of the report is to identify the gaps of knowledge and emerging patterns in the dynamically developing picture of the Armenian migrants in Istanbul. The report develops a general descriptive picture of the migrant groups, complete with analytical thoughts and notes on the collected data. Particular attention is given to the description of human fabric, settlement, employment, incorporation and social networking spaces of the Armenian migrants in Kumkapı (Fatih) and Kurtuluş (Şişli) neighborhoods of Istanbul, based on profiling check-ups of 40 migrants and semi-structured in-depth interviews of 15 migrants.

The added value of this report is providing recommendations to academicians, civil society and policymakers on the need of future research and actions to address the existing information gaps and understand the development patterns of this specific community of migrants.

## Methodology

During December 2017-January 2018, a desk and internet research was carried out to identify the existing studies, reports and media articles on the subject of Armenian migrants in Turkey. Furthermore, migrant specific localities (churches, schools, unions, businesses, etc.) were identified through inquiries and visits. Between January-March 2018, 40 migrant informants were identified in Kurtuluş and Kumkapı neighborhoods for profiling questionnaires and 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with them. The informants were identified through snowballing method, as well as individual people-to-people connections made by the author. Besides the aforementioned, extensive data was obtained through observations and engagement in place (attending church services, purchasing goods from the migrants, engaging in conversation at shops, etc.) by the author. Discussions and opinion sharing was conducted with several researchers and professionals informed about the subject of Armenians and Armenian migrants in Istanbul. Translation/transcription of the interviews and visualization of the questionnaire data was done in April 2018.

When approached, the informants were introduced to the purpose of the report. No informant was questioned out of his/her consent. Among a number of obstacles and limiting factors for conducting the research the largest one was the reluctance and cautiousness of the informants to share information about their migration trajectories or to be somehow identified. Anonymity of the informants and confidentiality of information is maintained.

# Historical Account of the Armenian Communities Abroad

Armenia is a country in the South Caucasus region, bordered by Georgia, Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan and de facto independent Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. According to the Statistical Yearbook of Armenia (2017), the country's population is around 3 million. Armenia is an ethnically homogenous country where approximately 98% of the population are Armenians. Among the ethnic minorities are Yezidis, Assyrians, Kurds, Russians and Greeks. Approximately 64% of the population lives in urban areas, with nearly 1.2 million in the capital Yerevan. The official language of the country is Armenian. The state religion is the Armenian Apostolic Church, part of Oriental Orthodoxy.

Over the centuries the population movements in Armenia have been determined by various historical and geo-political factors. These mobilities had a significant role in shaping the economic, cultural and social realities of the country. In order to understand the current migration context in Armenia, it is important to reflect upon the historical heterogeneity of the migration waves in the country.

As early as 12-13th centuries the Armenian travellers are mentioned in the historical accounts (Panossian 2006). The Cilician Kingdom of Armenia was one of the strategic trade routes between East-West crossroads. Ayas, the major coastal city of the Kingdom, connected the merchant travellers trading spices, silk, cotton, carpets. The Armenian travellers of the later centuries, who were mostly merchants, priests, scholars and students, greatly contributed to the establishment of linkage with the

global world. They travelled abroad and established communities stretching "from Singapore to Venice, from Esfahan to Amsterdam" (Policy Forum Armenia 2010).

However, the formation of the core Armenian (diasporic) communities abroad started in the later centuries. These communities are traditionally considered to be divided into old and new segments. The formation of the old, or classical, segment of the Armenian diaspora started in the 19th century, when the Armenian territories and nation were concentrated under the rules of the Russian and the Ottoman empires (Yeghiazaryan et al. 2003). As a result of the Medz Yeghern, a large number of Anatolian Armenians were forced to flee into the Middle East, Europe and Americas. The Armenian diaspora, being formed as a consequence of these tragic events, fully complies with the classical notion of diaspora defined by scholar William Safran (1991), i.e. an ethnic population living outside of their home country due to a forced displacement, clung to a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland.

The Armenian population worldwide can be roughly divided into two groups – Armenia-based and diaspora-based populations. Nowadays, the real number of Armenians born and living abroad far more exceeds the number of the population born and living in the country. The total Armenian population living abroad is considered to be around 10 million, while the actual population living in the country is estimated to be 3 million. "The sun never sets on the Armenian diaspora" – this statement by the prominent diaspora scholar Khachig Tölölyan (2001) accurately denotes the dynamics and distribution of the diaspora.

<sup>1</sup> *Cilician Armenia (1080–1375) was an independent Kingdom, created by the displaced Armenians fleeing from the Seljuk invasions. Cilicia was located in the southeastern coast of modern Turkey. The heritage of Cilician Kingdom has an important historical and cultural importance for Armenians.*

<sup>2</sup> *The expression literally means "Great Catastrophe" in Armenian, referring to the mass deportations and killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during 1915–1923.*

## Armenian Community of Turkey: the Bolsahay<sup>3</sup>

While distinguishing between Armenia-based population and the Diaspora, the status of Turkey's Armenian community is exceptional, as it does not comply with either of the above mentioned groups. Armenians are among the ancient peoples of Anatolia (Minority Rights Group International 2008). They have lived in their original homeland for centuries under the dominance of Byzantines and Ottomans (Örs and Komsuoğlu 2007) long before the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Thus, considering this exceptional status of Turkey's Armenian community, Tölölyan (1991) calls the Bolsahay community "inner or 'interstate' diaspora".

Constantinople, which had been flourishing around Bosphorus and Golden Horn, had always been a particular attraction for Armenians for working, studying and developing cultural activities. Already in the 16th century Istanbul was definitely one of the major scenes for the national, educational and cultural life of Armenians. In the context of "Eastern" and "Western" Armenia divide, the Bolsahay community was the heart of "Western" Armenia, being a center for Armenians outside the borders of the actual country (Geghamyan 2016).

Historically, the Ottoman identity was formed around religion, as millets (religious autonomous communities) existed within the Empire. Within the millet system there was a distinction between Muslims (Turks, Kurds, Arabs) and non-Muslims (Greeks, Armenians, Jews), however there was no differentiation based on ethnicity or language (Göl 2005). With the formation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the definition of the national identity shifted - unlike the Ottoman identity, the new republic privileged ethnicity over religion. The Constitution of 1924, and the successive constitutions of the Republic, define that everyone bound to the Turkish State through citizenship is a Turk and that "being a Turk" is simply based on an individual's self-identification as a Turk, irrespective of his/her ethnic origin or religion (Örs and Komsuoğlu 2007). However, despite this, the public perception of a "Muslim Turk" was uncompromising with the "otherness" of the non-Muslim minority groups (Örs and Komsuoğlu 2007), which put them in a difficult

situation, as they retained their culture and identity through ethnicity, rather than citizenship.

Since the period of World War I up to the formation of the Turkish Republic, a policy was pursued to decrease the number of non-Muslims living within the targeted borders of the new nation (Inalcık 2002), despite the religious and ethnic plurality inside Turkey. At the beginning of the 20th century minorities and foreigners constituted 56% of the population of Istanbul (Mills 2005). Today the non-Muslim minority groups constitute less than 1% of the population of Turkey (Kasbarian 2016).

The Turkish state officially recognized Armenians, Greeks and Jews as non-Muslim minorities by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, thus defining their legal status in Turkey. All Muslim minorities (Kurds, Circassians, etc.) were deemed to belong to the Turkish nation at the time of the foundation of the Republic (Kasbarian 2016). Among the rights and privileges defined by the Treaty was the right of non-Muslim minorities to maintain their own churches, schools, foundations and other institutions, thus maintaining their ethnic, cultural and religious identity (Komsuoğlu and Örs 2009).

As per the World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples (Minority Rights Group International 2008), the number of Armenians was around 2 million during the Ottoman Empire, while nowadays slightly more than 60,000 remain, 50,000 of whom live in Istanbul. The statistics of Muslim and non-Muslim populations of Turkey refers to a number of 50,000 Armenians as of 2005 (İçduygu and Kirişçi 2009). Even though emigration among the Istanbul Armenians has been heavy, a slow but steady inflow of remaining Anatolian Armenians has partly compensated for the loss (Björklund 2003).

<sup>3</sup> *Bolsahay is a term often used to refer to Istanbulite Armenians, based on the words "Bolis" and "Hay", Armenians often refer to Istanbul as Bolis or Polis (Constantinopolis); Hay means Armenian.*

# Emigration from the Republic of Armenia

For centuries displacement and migration have accompanied the Armenian people throughout their memory and lived experiences, as enforced by political and religious persecutions, economic hardships and natural disasters (Rasuly-Paleczek and Six-Hohenbalken 2017). Today the geographic region where the Republic of Armenia is located – South Caucasus – continues to be defined by complicated geopolitics, conflicts and closed borders.

After the short-lived first Armenian Republic in 1918, the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic was proclaimed in 1920. The population of the Soviet Armenia started to grow, notably due to the inflow of Armenians from the other South Caucasian republics (International Organization for Migration 2008). In 50 years, there was more than a threefold increase in the population of the Soviet Armenia, which was also conditioned by the strict Soviet regulations of the population's external movements (Yeghiazaryan et. al. 2003).

The situation changed after the World War II, when Armenia was vastly depopulated, and witnessed big human losses reaching up to one million people. To solve the demographic issue of the country and to improve the image of the victorious Soviet state, the authorities planned and implemented the biggest repatriation move in the new history of Armenia (Commission of the Soviet Nations 1945). During 1946–1948, they organized the return of around 90 thousand diaspora Armenians from around 15 countries of Middle East, Europe and Americas (Stepanyan 2010). This event is termed as "Great Repatriation". The return which had clear political implications was an emotional comeback for most of

the repatriates. In fact, the Soviet propaganda of repatriation depicted Armenia as a country of dreams, opportunities and well-being, which resulted in deep disappointment among most of the repatriates who faced the reality in the devastated post-war Soviet Armenia.

The next big migration wave happened in Armenia after 1988, when the huge earthquake in the northern region of the country (Spitak, Gyumri) caused around 200,000 affected people to emigrate. At the same period, the armed conflict around the Armenian-populated autonomous region in the neighboring Soviet Azerbaijan started, which caused an inflow of 360,000 ethnic Armenians from Azerbaijan, majority of whom soon emigrated to other countries (International Organization for Migration 2008).

The recent emigration flow from Armenia occurred after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Republic of Armenia in 1991. Since then, migration continues to be the main factor affecting the demography of the country (Ampop Online Media 2017). It is estimated that between 800,000 and 1,000,000 people have emigrated from Armenia since the beginning of 1990s due to the economic and social crisis (Minasyan et. al. 2008). As per the report of the Pew Research Center (2016), Armenia is in the top 10 countries where 25% of the people born in the country have migrated or sought refuge abroad, making 940,000 people as of 2015. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Jamaica are the ones ahead of Armenia with this indicator.

This last emigration wave is considered to be highly-skilled: it is estimated that around 30 percent of the emigrants had a college degree, while 50 percent had at least a high-school level education (World Bank 2002). However, if after 1991 and in the first years of the newly independent Republic, the Armenian citizens left the country because of the armed conflict, blockade, economic shutdown and unemployment, then in 2000s the reasons behind the emigration qualitatively changed. People started to leave the country seeking social justice and prospects for a qualitatively better, dignified future.

Migration statistics in Armenia is derived from limited sources. Among them, the negative/positive balance of the departures and arrivals registered at the border, few statistical data on stocks and flows of migrants, statistics in the field of international protection and legal stays of foreigners in the country, as well as certain household, labor force and migration sample surveys (Herm and Flander 2015). Though there is no reliable data on migration statistics, it is estimated that 2 million Armenians currently live in the Russian Federation (Manaseryan 2014), most of them are male labor migrants, who initially migrated for seasonal jobs. As per the Pew Research Center (and based on the UN international migration data) 56% of the Armenian migrants choose Russian Federation as a destination, 15% of the migrants are in Europe, 9.5% are in USA and Canada (Pew Research Center 2018).

## Emigration from Armenia to Turkey

For almost 3 decades the relations between Armenia and Turkey have been in limbo. Though Turkey officially recognized the independence of the Republic of Armenia in 1991, there are no diplomatic relations between two countries. As a solidarity sign with Azerbaijan in the war of Nagorno Karabakh, Turkey closed the air and land borders with Armenia in 1993, limiting the landlocked Armenia's connections to the land routes of Georgia and Iran. Though the airspace was opened in 1995 under the pressure of international society (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia), the land border closure remained. It affected the economic prospects of the region, among other things, while the Eastern border cities of Turkey were affected from the absence of cross-border economic activities and continue to be amongst the least developed regions in Turkey (TEPAV 2014).

Despite the closed border and absence of official diplomatic relations, the citizens of Armenia and Turkey can freely travel to the neighboring country. Upon arrival to Turkey, Armenian citizens who hold an ordinary passport can obtain a 1 month multiple entry tourist visa at the border or through e-Visa

system, by paying 25 USD or 15 USD, if applying through e-Visa system (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic Turkey). Likewise, the Turkish citizens holding ordinary passport can obtain a tourist visa valid for 21 days for around 6 USD upon arrival to Armenia or through e-Visa system (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia). As for the routes, there are Istanbul-Yerevan direct regular flights run by a private Turkish aircompany with an average one-way ticket price of 250 USD (as of April 2018). The buses between Istanbul and Yerevan run regularly several times a week by different private companies. Since no open land route exists, the buses pass through Georgia, crossing Turkey-Georgia and Georgia-Armenia borders within around two days. The average price of one way bus route is 80-90 USD, making it the most affordable and preferred route by the migrants.

Since there are no official diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey, obtaining reliable data or statistics on migration is almost impossible. Neither Armenia, nor Turkey have conducted any official survey about migrants from the neighboring country. Nevertheless, there are several resources that can shed light on the situation:

1. As per dataset of the international migration stock of the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, throughout 1990-2017<sup>4</sup> the total migrant stock from Armenia in Turkey make 4,680 people (192 in 1990 and 940 in 2017). These estimates are based on the official statistics on the foreign-born or the foreign population in the destination country (UNDESA 2017).

2. The border statistics of Turkey on the foreign visitors by nationalities for the years 2001-2016 shows that 781,885 Armenian nationals have arrived to Turkey (7,064 in 2001 and 39,063 in 2016). The highest number of arrivals during this period was 73,365 people in 2013.

3. Another resource is the data of the Ministry of Labor and Social Security of Turkey on the work

<sup>4</sup> Only for years 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2017

permits issued for foreigners. As per the 2016 report, the number of work permits given to Armenian nationals is 148 (of which 125 women and 23 men). Similar number persists for the previous years – 175 in 2015, 157 in 2014, 160 in 2013 (Ministry of Labor and Social Security of the Republic of Turkey).

4. Another source is the data on apprehension cases of irregular migrants in Turkey by nationality. Such detailed data was available only for the years 2000-2012. During this period 8,051 Armenian nationals were reported to be apprehended as irregular migrants (İçduygu 2013).

5. As for the official migration statistics of Turkey, Armenian nationals do not fall in the 10 largest groups of migrants in Turkey (categorized by entries, residence permits, irregular status). The nationals of Armenia's neighbors - Azerbaijan, Georgia and Iran - fall into the top 10 immigration origin countries (Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Turkey).

6. Though not related to labor migration, it is worthwhile to look at the official numbers of student migrants in Turkey as well. Per the Higher Education Information Management System, the number of Armenian students in Turkey for the year 2016-2017 makes 18 (13 female, 5 male) (Higher Education Information Management System).

7. There are very few researches referring to the number of Armenian migrants in Turkey, one of them is the Eurasia Partnership Foundation's sociological qualitative report (Ozinian 2009) which estimates that there are 15,000 Armenian labor migrants in Istanbul.

In general, the presence of the Armenian migrants, regular or irregular, is deliberately "overlooked" by the Turkish state, but occasionally the issue comes to the surface of the political discourse. The community of migrants is often used as a "hostage" in unexpected developments in the relations between Turkey and Armenia (Akgönül 2013). On different occasions Turkey's authorities have threatened to deport Armenian migrants, thus creating more precariousness and vulnerability for them. One of such threats was Prime Minister Erdoğan's reaction

on the the resolutions passed by US and Sweden in 2010, recognising the mass killings of Armenians by Ottoman Turks as Genocide (The Guardian 2010) –

*"There are currently 170,000 Armenians living in our country. Only 70,000 of them are Turkish citizens, but we are tolerating the remaining 100,000. If necessary, I may have to tell these 100,000 to go back to their country because they are not my citizens. I don't have to keep them in my country."*

## Literature Review

Literature and resources on the Armenian migrants in Turkey are scarce. Much more references are available on the media (articles, videos), however these reports often shape a one-sided image of the migrants, generally depicting all-female migrant profiles who perform cleaning and care jobs (Osservatorio Balkan e Caucaso 2012; Eurasianet 2011, AlJazeera 2016). Meanwhile, this does not reflect a holistic picture, and the realities of the migrants' experiences are much more diverse.

As a result of the literature review (desk and internet), the list of below resources on the subject have been identified:

- **Encountering the Armenian Community: Experiences of Armenian Domestic Workers in Istanbul, Master's Thesis by Monika Paksoy, Middle East Technical University, 2017**

The thesis presents the perceptions and experiences of Armenian immigrant domestic workers in Istanbul regarding their ethnic, religious and national identities, by analyzing their narratives about their journey to Turkey, experiences in Istanbul and relationships with their Armenian and non-Armenian employers. Qualitative methods have been applied in this study by means of utilizing

participant observation, focus group discussions, semi-structured and informal interviews with 15 female Armenian immigrants. The primordial, ethno-symbolic and constructed aspects of identity have been addressed to understand the role of myths, symbols, ethnic election and common ancestry in the definition of "Armenian identity".

The study notes that the existing Armenian community and culture was already a motive for the migrants to choose Istanbul as a destination, however through targeted and in-depth understanding of national, ethnic and religious sentiments, it concluded that a reformulation of identity has taken place on immigrants' part with the influence of an active community life in Istanbul. In other words, the existence of an Armenian community in Istanbul, the role of language, engagement in the Armenian Apostolic Church and sense of kinship based on ethnic ties greatly contribute to the experiences of Armenian immigrant domestic workers in Istanbul.

• **Migrations, Borders and Boundaries: Post-Soviet Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Turkey, Book, Fabio Salomoni, The Isis Press, 2016**

This book is a holistic description of the experiences of Armenian and Azerbaijani migrants in Turkey. Though similar in some patterns, the two groups are very diverse and perceive Turkey differently. The book provides a detailed background information about Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, their borders, borders regimes, and population mobility. As for the migrant groups, the book provides details on their pre-migration situation and motives for choosing Turkey as a destination country. Further on, a detailed description of the migration paths and profiles is provided for Armenians and Azerbaijanis (gender, age, families, origins, legal status, length of stay, work, settlement, mobility, health, education, etc.). An interesting comparison is made on the ethnic boundaries between Armenians and Istanbul Armenians, and between Turks and Azerbaijanis. A very interesting chapter describes the borderland of Kars-Iğdır, where 3 countries Armenia, Turkey and Azerbaijan (Nakhidjevan) have common border. The book is very useful for overall understanding of

migration patterns of post-Soviet Caucasian populations as well.

• **An Island within an Island: Educational Needs Assessment of Armenian Migrants in Turkey, Research, Anna Muradyan, YUVA, 2015**

The main aim of the research is to evaluate the educational needs of the Armenian migrants and understand how these problems can be addressed and changed. The research touches upon the following questions: 1) To describe the overall picture of the lifestyle and issues of the citizens of Armenia living in Istanbul, focusing on their lifestyle tendencies recorded since 2010, as Armenians who came to Istanbul fifteen years ago differ from those who came one or two years ago. 2) Through an educational needs assessment of the Armenian migrants, to indicate what specific initiatives should be undertaken to change the existing situation.

The focus group of the research are single women working in Istanbul while their families are in Armenia and married women who are in Istanbul with their families. The information is based on 40 in-depth interviews, 15 expert interviews and observations. Some conclusions indicate that a) Migration flow from Armenia is decreasing; b) the number of regular migrants has been increasing; c) the tendency of residing in Turkey and not returning to Armenia has been registered. Among the recommendations, the research suggests creation of migration resource center, which will provide various information to the migrants, such as information about the migrant rights and residence permits, as well as will provide trainings and information according to preferences and needs of the migrants.

• **Transnational Migration Networks and Building of Social Fields: A Sociological Research on Labor Migration from Armenia to Turkey (available in Turkish), Doctoral Thesis by Lülüfer Körükmez, Ege University, 2012**

The thesis analyzes the labor migration flows from Armenia to Turkey after collapse of the Soviet Union. This migration flow is viewed as different from other flows mainly because of the

socio-political atmosphere, which is a result of the historical and political issues between two countries. The thesis raises two questions – 1) despite this atmosphere, how and why the Armenian immigrants make the decision to migrate to Turkey; 2) how the presence of the Armenian community is influencing the migration processes of the Armenians from Armenia. The pilot phase of the research was carried out between June 2008 and April 2009, as there was almost no information about the issue. The actual field survey was conducted between September 2011 and April 2012 in Istanbul. 29 semi-structured interviews were conducted with non-migrants (Turks and local Armenians) and 42 interviews with migrants.

The study views Armenian migrants in the frame of transnationalism, highlights the role of networks and social capital embedded in these networks, as well as inclusion or exclusion of these networks. One of the conclusions of the study is that the Armenian migrants, despite all the limitations, were able to create a transnational social space. Even if they cannot be classified within the "totally transnational" category with high-level mobility, social and material capital, they can be included in the category of "transnational outsiders" whose networks are non-global and whose social, political and cultural capital is limited.

• **Armenian Migrants in Turkey: History of a Journey, Master's Thesis by Nivart Taşçı, Bogazici University, 2010**

The thesis covers a decade-long story of Armenian migrants living in Kumkapı neighborhood of Istanbul. Based on 9 months of ethnographic work, it treats their way of settlement, employment and integration in their new location by referring to well-known notions of immigration and economic sociology. Though both male and female migrants are included in the focus group, greater attention is given to the experiences of female migrants, aiming to contribute to the literature on feminization of migration. The thesis analyzes the main determinants that brings migrants from Armenia to Turkey, i.e. employment, better wages and ethnic economies.

• **Identifying the State of Armenian Migrants in Turkey, Research, Alin Ozinian, Eurasia Partnership Foundation, 2009**

The study seeks to: 1) accurately determine the state of Armenian migrants in Turkey; 2) expose the social-legal problems of Armenian migrants and study the probable solutions of the situation; 3) try to determine profiles, relationships and real number of the Armenian migrants; 4) expose community leaders' knowledge, attitudes and perceptions towards Armenian migrants; 5) prepare recommendations to the Turkish and Armenian government and civil society to ameliorate the situation of Armenian illegal migrants in the absence of official relations between the two countries.

The research is based on Turkish and international press scanning and researches/studies about Armenian migrants in Turkey, as well as on interviews (face-to-face, phone and written questionnaires) with 150 migrants based in Kumkapı district of Istanbul. Besides providing a general profiling of migrants (gender, education, occupation, income, residency status, residency in Armenia, etc.) the study also reflects on the situation through interview excerpts. Among the recommendations of the study are the following: 1) to conduct a smaller-scale sociological research on returnees, as upon return from Turkey to Armenia they may say things they wouldn't dare to say while in Turkey; 2) to conduct an in-depth desk research of the whole set of Turkish policies and procedures regulating migration issues; 3) given the fact that the majority of Armenian irregular migrants in Turkey are women, the research on the (potential) role of women shelters and women organizations in Turkey in helping Armenian women might be explored.



# PART II

Part II refers to the main findings based on the fieldwork, including charts deriving from the profiling questionnaires with 40 migrants, and excerpts of semi-structured interviews with 15 migrants. The findings are complemented with author's analyses and notes.

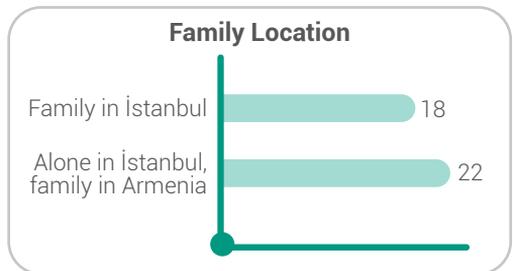
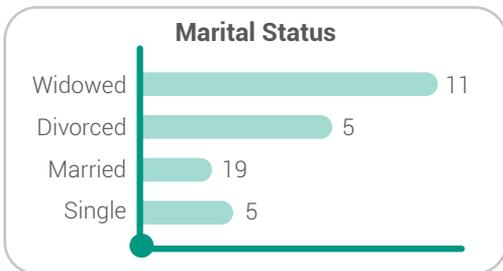
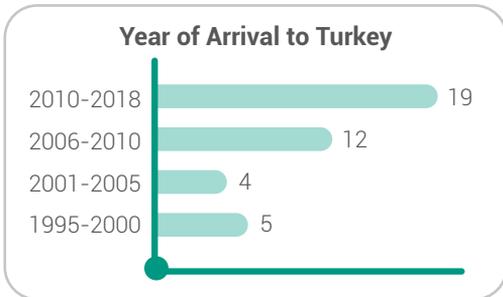
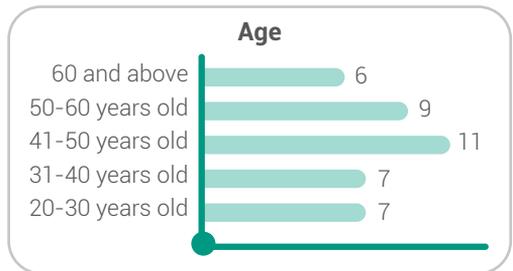
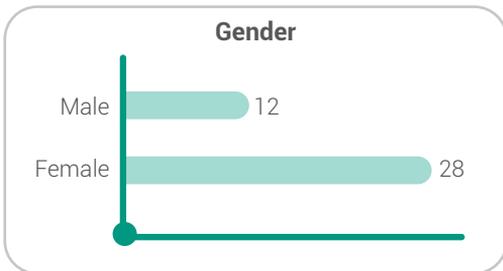
# Armenian Migrants in Kumkapı and Kurtuluş: Profiles

When profiling the Armenian migration to Turkey the prevailing discourse (in media, academia and public space) is that most of the migrants are women, aged 40-60, performing housemaid's or caregiver's jobs. Indeed the majority of the migrants are women, but

age and occupation (see Employment section) characteristics are generalized. In reality the picture of Armenian labor migration to Istanbul is more complex, as the migrant groups involve younger women and men of different ages, as well as minors.

As for the origin of the migrants in Armenia, a large part of them are from Shirak and Lori provinces (mostly from towns Gyumri and Vanadzor), however a considerable number of migrants originate from various other urban and rural settlements in Armenia, such as Hrazdan, Echmiadzin, Artashat, Goris, as well as the capital Yerevan.

The graphs below show the profiles of 40 migrants by gender, age and origin, as well as their year of migration to Turkey, marital status, family location and education level.



Besides extracting data from the above charts, the report tries to also categorize the migrant groups based on the general observations and interviews. It is important to note that the categories below are **not exhaustive, not exclusive and often can overlap** with one another.

- **Early arrivals:** These are the pioneers of migration from Armenia to Turkey. They moved out in the early years of Armenia's independence (early 1990s), their stay in Istanbul usually adds up to 15 and more years. They are quite flexible and incorporated into both Turkish and Bolsahay communities, due to the knowledge of Turkish language and some laws/regulations concerning foreigners. These people usually have regularized<sup>5</sup> status. Their immediate family members are usually residing with them in Istanbul. Their job status is comparatively advanced or stable, and may involve small entrepreneurship.
- **"Mothers":** These are females of 40-60 years old or beyond who are widowed, divorced or have husbands in Armenia. They are solo migrants in Istanbul, usually living in small groups with other working women. They usually have grown-up, married children in Armenia and often also grandchildren. These women have strong inclination of "sacrificing" themselves for the sake of supporting their children/family with remittances or try to arrange their move to Turkey to live together with them. This group is the most visible on the whole demographic overview of Armenian migrants in Istanbul. Despite usually having irregular status for work or residence, these women build up a good reputation of being decent, trustworthy, hardworking employees.
- **Families and young families:** When the situation and financial means allow, some "mothers" are followed by their husbands and children's families. In Istanbul they live all together, as in Armenia – often 3 generations under one roof. In Istanbul's case that roof is usually one or two rooms for a family of 5 or 6. Despite the fact that chain migration, following

the female head of the family is common, many young families move to Turkey independently. Usually friends and acquaintances act as a networking support for this group to arrange their move. Typically, in such families the husband works, while women either don't work and take care of child(ren) or work part-time.

- **Male migrants:** Men are less visible, however not insignificant segment among Armenian migrants in Istanbul. Both young and elderly men usually reside with their families. The main sectors of employment for this group are jewelry industry, shoe/leather industry, trade/shops, car services, cargo services, interior works, and various craftsmanship. Those who do not work, usually act as "protectors" for their family, as they consider Turkey to be unsafe place, especially for Armenian females.
- **Transnational mobile migrants:** This is quite small, but interesting and unstudied group of migrants. It includes those who have moved from Armenia in early independence years and migrated to Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Europe or other countries and eventually settled in Istanbul. Their mobility paths include at least 2 destinations, they are quite flexible and resourceful. Returning to Armenia is usually not in their strategy.
- **Highly skilled temporary migrants or students:** This last category is the smallest one but the most different from the rest of the groups by its migration history and motives. The number of these migrants is so small that can be easily traced in Istanbul. It includes those Armenians who work temporarily in regional offices of international organizations in Istanbul, those who are on a short-term exchange programme or are studying in Istanbul universities.

<sup>5</sup> Regularized here means having valid residence permit, or residence and work permit.

## Motivation for Choosing Turkey

Despite the fact that Turkey, as a destination, does not appear often in the discourse of contemporary Armenian migration, it is true that a sizable number of Armenian labor migrants choose Turkey as their destination. The reasons for choosing Turkey are various, the most common ones being the **geographical proximity** and **affordability of the travel**, as well as **ease of entry** in Turkey (tourist visas issued on the border or online).

The abovementioned reasons also feed the motives of those who intend to **migrate temporarily**. It is easy to make a decision to migrate temporarily when the move does not require traveling long distances or paying large expenses. Thus, if not wanting to stay in Turkey longer, the migrants do not have to "sacrifice" much or bear big losses of resources.

Another trigger for choosing Turkey is the existing **cultural and community ties**. Certainly some cultural norms in Armenia and Turkey are similar, or, if not acceptable, these norms are at least understandable for Armenians, such as attitude towards elderly, behavior in public, etc. Another trigger is **Bolsahay community's presence**, which provides a huge **social anchor and resources** for the arriving migrants.

Last but not least, Turkey is often chosen an **alternative destination to Russia**. Indeed, Russia remains the main destination for the majority of Armenian migrants; however, those who do not want to migrate to Russia often turn to Turkey. The following quote perfectly sums it up:

*"You know how it is in Russia now – the young generation is so discriminative towards Caucasians. They are so aggressive... Turks are not so. I haven't met any Turk who would react aggressively or discriminatively towards people from Caucasus. Turks are nicer and calmer in these terms... Indeed there might be extreme cases, but I haven't encountered one."* **T, female, 58, housemaid**

## Return to Armenia

Armenian migrants see future in Istanbul, but that future is very immediate and full of unpredictability. The situation of the migrants is too sensitive to any political moves involving Armenia, Turkey and/or a third country, as it immediately reminds the Turkish authorities about the presence of the Armenian migrants in the country.

Many migrants reported their willingness to return to Armenia *"as soon as the situation improves there"* or *"if there are jobs there"*. In fact, earning the average of 600-700 US dollars monthly, many migrants continue staying in the loop of poverty. They see their migration plan not being realized and no social mobility achieved.

Those who have left Armenia in early 1990s, have less inclination to go back. Instead, they express the wish to move to another country, usually Europe or Russia.

*"Istanbul provides many opportunities, but it is not a place I would like to stay for long."* **R, male, 42, trader**

*"All Armenia thinks that we live in a paradise. But look, my child is always sick because of the damp room. It's not even a basement, it's below that! But I cannot afford moving out to another place, as the normal rooms are so expensive. I will speak in front of the cameras, if necessary, I will show the real face of life in Turkey."* **M, female, 38, cleaning lady**

## Settlement: Kurtuluş and Kumkapı Calling

Spanning on the continents of Europe and Asia with population of 16 million, Istanbul is the fifth most crowded city in the world and the largest city in Turkey. While in 1980s only 4.5 million people lived in the city, a rapid growth of urbanization followed in the next decades (World Population Review 2018). Besides being the country's economic and cultural center, Istanbul has been home to most of the

ethnic and religious minorities in Turkey. The city has also been a major immigration and transit migration hub for internal migrants mostly from southern and eastern Turkey and the Black Sea region, migrants and refugees from Iran, Iraq, the Balkans, sub-Saharan and Western Africa (Bither et.al. 2016), as well as countries of Eastern European block or post-Soviet space.

The picture is no different for the Armenian migrants, 99 percent of whom are concentrated in Istanbul. For most Armenian migrants, however, Istanbul is not the "Bolis", with its nostalgic connotation of an 18-19th century multicultural hub – it is a place to earn for living. The settlements of Armenian migrants in Istanbul are not accidental and reflect the socio-spatial history of the city in relation with its Armenian minority and migrant communities in general. Based on various studies and observations, we can conclude that Armenian migrants are mostly concentrated in Kumkapı, Feriköy, Kurtuluş, Bakırköy, Yeşilköy, Kadıköy and Zeytinburnu districts of Istanbul. Sometimes the locality of the migrant's settlement denotes his/her move up the socio-economic ladder, such as moving from Kumkapı to Feriköy, Kurtuluş or Bakırköy and then to Yeşilköy (Baykal 2011). This report focuses only on the migrant communities in Kumkapı and Kurtuluş neighborhoods.

**Kumkapı (Fatih):** During the Ottoman empire and Republican state Kumkapı has been considered a residential quarter for Greeks and Armenians, however after 1950s the demography and spatial function of the neighborhood changed, as for other minority neighborhoods in Istanbul. From 1970s onwards, through 1990s and 2000s, the growing number of international migration to Istanbul intensified the already-existing diversity of the neighborhood. Indeed, many migrants were attracted to the proximity of the trading, tourism and economic profiles and informal employment options in the neighboring Laleli, Grand Bazar, Aksaray and Gedikpaşa neighborhoods, among which Kumkapı remained as a residential peninsula. However, availability of affordable and suitable housing, abundance of landlords and tenants, emergence of ethnic services, shops, businesses

(call shops, cargos, money transfer offices, etc.) made the neighborhood an attractive point for those who came to work, seek asylum or live in transit (Biehl 2014).

Indeed, the above mentioned factors determine the decision of the Armenian migrants to settle in Kumkapı. If not settling permanently, then their first "stopover" is in Kumkapı, prior to starting a spatial mobility in other neighborhoods of Istanbul. Among the reasons of Armenians choosing Kumkapı is also the existence of still active co-ethnic space and institutions of the Armenian community in Istanbul. Among them is the Armenian Patriarchate in Turkey<sup>6</sup> (Armenian Patriarchate in Turkey 2018), several churches, the Beziciyan main school and institutions of Istanbulite Armenian community. These institutions have indeed shaped and continue shaping the determination of migrants to settle in Kumkapı, however there are also new emerging migrant-specific spaces and ethnic businesses which were observed throughout this research (see chapter Migrant Spaces of Interaction) and which play a determining role in migrants' choices of settlement.

**Kurtuluş (Şişli):** Kurtuluş is a neighborhood in Şişli. Originally known as Tatavla, the neighborhood was traditionally inhabited by Greeks. Tatavla was established in the 16th century, when men seized from Greek Islands were forced to work in Ottoman shipyards at Kasimpaşa and moved to the Kurtuluş hilltop after their church in Kasimpaşa was converted to a mosque. The piece of land they chose was once used as pasture land, and the words "Ta Tavla" mean "The Stables" in Greek from where the name Tatavla is derived. The church of Aya Dimitri was founded in 1535 in Tatavla, and in 1793 it was decreed by Sultan Selim III that only Greek people could live there. In early 20th century the small Greece in Turkey was renamed Kurtuluş (Vimeo documentary, "From Tatavla to Kurtuluş" 2012).

<sup>6</sup> With the absence of any diplomatic institution or consulate that can address the issues of the Armenian citizens, the migrants who get in trouble, often seek refuge and assistance at the Patriarchate.

Besides Greeks, the neighborhood and larger district of Şişli, was also inhabited by Armenians. For centuries the district had a sizable Armenian population, the presence of which are proven by Şişli's large Armenian cemetery, churches, schools and institutes. Armenian newspapers Agos and Jamanak are also published in Şişli. It is noteworthy, that the Jamanak is the world's longest running minority newspaper, marking 110th anniversary in 2018 (Hürriyet Daily News 2018).

Currently, the neighborhood continues to be home of the Armenian community – Istanbulites and migrants, who either live or work here. Small business culture is strong in the cosy neighborhood, and the number of eating and drinking establishments, bakeries, shops owned by Istanbul Armenians is high. The community usually attracts Armenian migrants to work in their establishments or households. Strolling through the streets of Kurtuluş, one will definitely hear both Western and Eastern Armenian languages spoken. Compared to Kumkapı, the number of Armenian migrants is comparatively lower in Kurtuluş (based on personal observations), however the migrants in Kurtuluş find themselves in a qualitatively better

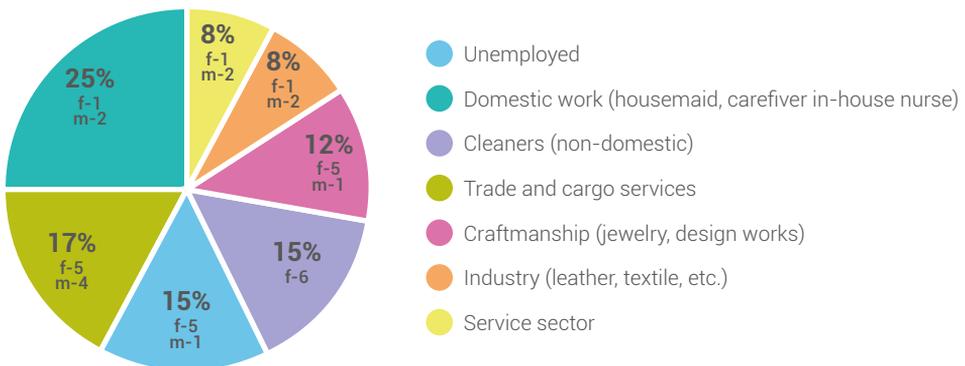
setting and conditions, than the ones living in Kumkapı.

It is interesting to observe the evolving spatial differentiation, which is not necessarily based on the past reputation of the neighborhoods. For instance, there is an evolving unofficial "Gyumri street" in Kumkapı, named such after a large number of migrants from Gyumri. Another interesting observation is that there are already internal perceptions or "labeling" among Armenian migrant groups living in Kumkapı and Kurtuluş. Kurtuluş men, when using the expression "to be like Kumkapı men", mean to be jobless or not willing to work. This is how Kumkapı migrant men are perceived in their eyes. Similarly, Kurtuluş female migrants state that they would never wish to work in Kumkapı, as they consider it indecent and dangerous place.

*"Have you been to Kumkapı? I'd never work there, under no circumstances!" L, female, 55, caregiver*

## Economic Practices and Labor Profiles

Current Job Profiles





Since the 1990s, when Turkey started to grow into an immigration and transit migration country, Istanbul's large informal economy provided many opportunities for migrant groups to find jobs. Armenian migrants are also part of the wider economy, however their regularity status, nationality, gender, age and other factors determine the specifics of their incorporation into the labor market.

As the chart above and the interviews show, the majority of Armenian **female migrants** are involved in **domestic labor** (housemaids, caregivers). An interesting trend was observed in the migration history of these women, who reported that their first employers in Istanbul were Istanbulite Armenians. This was a strategy to avoid the language limitation of not knowing Turkish<sup>7</sup>, as well as allowed feeling more secure. However, over the course of the time, by learning the language and being more informed about other options, the migrants were able to move on and find work in Turkish or Syriac households. Over the time, the migrants also learn cooking local dishes, which is an essential skill to work in the local households.

There are several types of domestic work: the first one is **housemaid's job**, when the employee stays in the house of the employer. This is a preferred option for women who are without families in Istanbul, as they reduce the living costs of rent and partially of food. Sometimes women work at several households at the same time, working certain days and hours at certain households; or do not have a fixed schedule but work upon call by the employers. Another type of domestic work performed mostly by female migrants is **caregiving** for old or disabled people. Out of our

respondents only one male reported being a caregiver for an old paralyzed person. Besides providing a "safe haven" and less exposure for irregular migrants, the domestic work also provides other benefits, such as in-kind contributions from the employers (clothes, used items, food) or support in health-related issues (partial coverage of employee's health expenses) which is due to special kinship that the migrants develop with their patrons (this is the word used by many domestic workers to refer to their employers).

*"Women from Armenia are considered to be clean, loyal, non-cheating, this is important for the patrons. They don't like when you poke your nose into family affairs or gossip the inside information out. Besides, they can pay us half of the price of the salary that the local workers would require for such a job."* **S, female, 49, housemaid**

*"Turkish households don't care about politics between our countries. Armenians are familiar to them, even if they haven't had any direct contact with any Armenian before. At the same time we are foreigners. So we are familiar others."* **V, female, 56, caregiver**

**Nursing** is another type of in-house work observed throughout interviews. These are those migrants who have medical background but cannot be formally enrolled in a job in Istanbul, therefore they make regular visits to the houses and provide basic medical care. Such examples were only observed in Kurtuluş, where Armenian female migrants visited the houses of Bolsahay families and provided medical assistance to old people.

In younger families, where the strategy is to maximize economic outputs of the migration, young mothers need to adjust their work with the care of their children. A considerable number of young mothers reported being involved in non-fixed **cleaning jobs** at households or working as cleaning ladies at local hotels where the timing allows them

<sup>7</sup> Despite speaking different dialects of Western and Eastarrn Armenian, the migrants and Istanbul Armenians can easily communicate with each other.

to finish their jobs earlier during the day and pick up their kids from school or kindergarten. In some cases, the elder members of the family support by taking care of the grandchildren, while the youngsters work.

*"I work at two houses, one of a Turkish family and one of an Istanbul Armenian's. My time is divided between two jobs - 6 hours in total, Sunday free. I am quite satisfied with my job, and together with my husband's salary we make it enough for our two kids. Would I ever earn this much in Armenia?"* **A, female, 32, cleaner**

*- I have been out of Armenia for more than 10 years now, I worked mostly in Russia. Now I am in Turkey to help my daughter's family to take care of two grandchildren. If I find a job, I will work, but at this age maybe my biggest contribution will be taking care of grandchildren, so that the younger ones can work.*

*- What are your housing conditions here?*

*- Well, we have 1.5 room [laughing] - a room and a kitchen for 5 people.*

**S, male, 64, unemployed (former construction worker)**

Fewer women are also involved in food and leather/textile industries, which are more harmful in terms of physical labor and risky for exposing irregular status.

**Male migrants** are usually involved in jobs at **jewelry workshops, shoe/leather/textile industries, trade/shops, car services, cargo services, and various craftsmanship**. These are businesses often owned by Turks or Istanbul Armenians, who employ the migrants. Compared to domestic jobs, these jobs do not require much language skills, but rather technical skills, speed and physical resilience. Only one male respondent reported working as an in-house caregiver.

As compared to women, men reported less stability regarding their jobs and job types. While women could maintain same jobs for several years or at least stick to the similar type of job (e.g. cleaning, caregiving), men reported doing various types of

jobs or "whatever comes up", with frequent changes – working as load carriers, at construction sites, markets, or industries.

Interesting observation is that the report did not identify any Armenian male migrant working at food industry in Istanbul, while in Armenia food service employs vast number of men.

*"The work is hard - from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., with one day off. That one day I want to spend at home, no wish to go out anywhere. My job is placing small stones on the jewelry, too many of them. I need to concentrate and my sight is getting worse. But I am happy with my job."* **G, male, 26, jewelry craftsmanship**

*- I cannot name any job that I didn't do when I came to Turkey. Now I work as 'kafelchik' [interior work of placing tiles] and I have big clientele. I am very satisfied, thanks God, no complaints. I worked in Russia as well, so sometimes when there is no job in Istanbul, I move to Moscow. I have big clientele there as well.*

*- How do you manage your documents between two countries?*

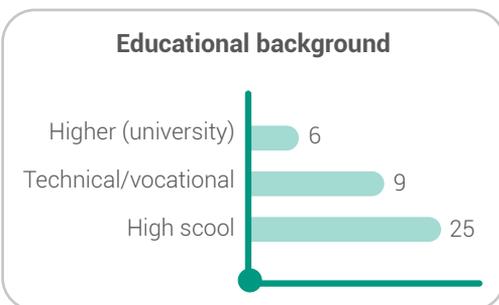
*-Let's not talk about that, sister.* **A, male, 37, tiler**

Quite widespread occupation for men and women is **trade or suitcase trade**. The flourishing informal transnational trade sector is setting good ground for such activities. There are many sophisticated forms of cross-border suitcase trade, but in general the migrants purchase customs-free or tax-free import goods and carry it to another country in luggage. For instance, the Armenian migrants usually purchase shoes, clothes, textiles, accessories, bags, and cosmetics and carry it across borders of Armenia (or Georgia, Russia) to sell in domestic markets. In other forms, the migrants arrange the transportation of goods via buses (paying other passengers or drivers for transportation) or cargo services. In this case more risks are involved and reliability of the transporting person or service is very important.

In return, the suitcase traders purchase goods in Armenia (Georgia, Russia, etc.) and sell it in

Istanbul's migrant neighborhoods. To the report's observations these sellers were particularly cautious and even sometimes objected taking photos of the goods. These goods are usually items or food that cannot be found even in the vast market of Istanbul, and bear the symbolism and taste of the homeland. One usually will not easily find such goods, but careful observations in migrant neighborhoods and acting as genuinely interested to buy specific food/drink will lead you to the required sell-point. For instance, in Kurtuluş one can find migrants selling different items on a side of a pavement - wine, brandy, vodka, smoked sausages and cheese, eggplant caviar, canned fish, condensed milk, buckwheat (grechka), chocolates, candies, and even sunflower seeds. In Kumkapı, there are several small shops featuring various items/food common in post-Soviet countries. In addition to the goods named above, one will be surprised to find "pryaniki" (kurabiye-type cookies) and sour cream from Armenia, candies from Ukraine, even mayonnaise and soda (karbonat) from Russia. To my surprised question why one would need soda from abroad, I received equally surprised answer: "That's a different one."

As for the **educational background** of migrants, most of them reported having high school or technical/vocational level of education.



Those migrants who have higher education and perform lower ranked jobs in Istanbul find it psychologically difficult to accept the working conditions, as they mention about their dignity being offended. These feelings and the perception of "self-sacrifice" are aggravated by the fact that the migrants have to perform the job in Turkey.

*"Yes I have a higher education and I did a decent work in the past, but I decided not to expect special attitude from my patron for that. I am performing a lower rank job, but my patron is not guilty for that. They need someone to clean the house and that's why they hired me. I cannot keep my head high and say that I'll not do the job."*  
**T, female, 58, housemaid**

Indeed, the above description of the job profiles is not exhaustive and requires more detailed research on the subject. There are various facets of the suitcase trade as well. The labor types performed by Armenian migrants are quite diverse and dynamic, but the general trend is that they fill the low-skilled ranks of the informal economy in Istanbul.

Trafficking and sex work was a subject constantly avoided by the informants of this report.

- *This district of Aksaray is very dangerous. There are many nightclubs nearby attended by Central Asians, Chechens, etc. The girls from the clubs often come to our beauty salon. I do my job, I don't care who they are, that's not my business. I work here from morning till evening and I am too tired to go out and see anything else.*
- *Are there Armenians among the girls from the nightclubs?*
- *It's not my business. I don't know. Everyone makes decision by herself.*  
**S, female, 42, hairdresser**

## Job Finding and Maintaining



As the chart shows none of the respondents reported finding a job through announcements or job agencies. In fact, the institute of middlemen is quite advanced for Armenian migrants, being manifested in ethnic networks of family members, relatives, acquaintances and neighbors. If not directly finding a job, then these networks function perfectly by introducing and recommending the newly arrived or jobless migrant to certain employers who might be interested in hiring.

*"When I came from Armenia, I had no one here. My neighbors in Armenia encouraged me to come here and they helped me to find a job." S, female, 49, housemaid*

In fact, the ethnic networks are also manifested in other support activities, such as financial or logistical support. Some migrants reported about staying overnight at other migrants' places during the first days of their arrival, before finding job and lodging. Others reported about temporary financial support or money loaning, but this requires much trust among the migrants.

*"Indeed we [Armenian migrants] support each other. Right now I loaned money to a few people to go to Armenia and come back, so that their visa entry is 'cleared', you know. When good people need money for such issues I try to support them. We are few, but we are here to support each other." K, female, 42, jewelry craftsmanship*

Meanwhile, for an irregular migrant losing his/her job with no weighty reason is quite easy. The competition is high, and the labor market provides plenty of options of employees.

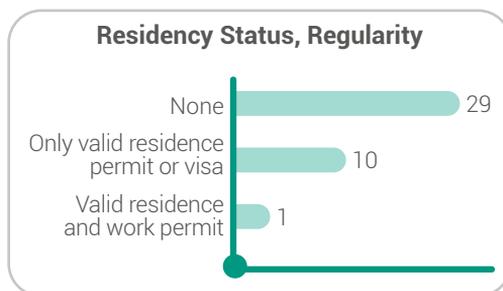
*"I had a health issue and had to go back to Yerevan for the regular check-up. I thought it was a matter of few days, but it lasted longer and my job situation turned out into a mess... We arranged someone to replace me while I was away, but upon arrival she already took my place. I couldn't get back my job... It's been already 6-7 months I am looking for a job everywhere, I send my photos, make calls, but nothing comes up... Istanbul is not the same as before. They [the new arrivals] all*

*came and took over, you never know what is the criteria of getting a job anymore." A, female, 61, unemployed*

It is interesting to observe in the narratives of the informants how the labor space is dynamically shifting and perhaps shrinking in Istanbul. While there is "solidarity" among post-Soviet migrants in supporting or catering each others' ethnic businesses, these migrants become competitors when it comes to be employed by local (Turkish) employers. Indeed, it is a subject of a whole new research to evaluate the dynamics of changes in the labor front, however there are certain factors that determine the tendency of hiring certain migrant groups at certain job positions, such as the salary rank, the skills set, language skills, etc. The Armenian migrants reported on shrinking options of labor due to the vast presence of Syrian refugees in Istanbul, as well as the inflow of migrant groups from post-Soviet and Central Asian (Turkic) countries. This creates more competition among migrant labor force and more tensions in lower ranks of undocumented labor.

*"One person's actions spoil the good name of the rest. Nowadays, both Turkish and Armenian households prefer not to hire us [Armenian migrants], but those from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan... Why? Because some Armenians act so shamefully and degrade our name. Also, they [migrants from Central Asia] work for less money." V, female, 54, unemployed*

## Residence Status, Protraction and Irregularity



Most of the Armenian labor migrants in Istanbul are undocumented or irregular. Irregularity comes in respect to their lack of residence and work permits. Even if there are valid residence permits, the work permits are almost non-existent for Armenian migrants. They usually enter Turkey in a regular way, via tourist visa, and later overstay their visas. The visa gives right to stay 30 days in Turkey and can be re-issued by re-entering the country. Those who want to regularize their status currently have to pay "ceza" (fines for overstaying) and leave Turkey. If not paying the "ceza", the migrant is deported and forbidden to enter the country for 5 years.

The status regularization issues become protracted for many migrants, because leaving the country every month, especially if the migrant has a job is difficult. Also, for people who hardly make living, even the reasonable yearly payments for residence are not affordable. The overtime accumulated fines and favorable conditions for performing shadow jobs, make migrants more reluctant to regularize their status. The status regularization also highly depends on the work type: those who are involved in trade activities (known as suitcase trade) cross the border regularly. They do not necessarily travel to Armenia, but make trade in Georgia or Russia, thus cross the border of Turkey and have chances to re-enter the country regularly. Indeed these suitcase traders only renew their visa, but they do not have work permits. Those who are domestic workers usually have more opportunities to go unnoticed in terms of their status, especially the ones who live in the houses of their employers. As long as the workers are careful and do not spend much time outside, the employers are not concerned. Another category of migrants, those who work in the industries, again are hired without documentation/regularization by the employers, since the latter prefer to not show the real number of their hired staff. Therefore, this situation is also "profitable" both for the employers and employees.

*-Istanbul is not the same as before, it's been 3 months I am looking for a job and nothing comes up. I have no one here except one friend, she knows all my life.*

*- So you don't send money home, do you?*

*- No, I don't have the means to send money home. I can't even earn for myself, how can I send money?!*

*- Then why don't you go back to Armenia?*

*- Something will come up... What should I do if I go back? ...Listen, daughter, you are not going to put me in danger, are you? I trusted you that I don't have documents, but please don't put me in danger. V, female, 54, unemployed*

## Incorporation and Migrant Spaces of Interaction

When it comes to incorporation of migrants into a host society, the primary limiting factors could be the feeling of insecurity, fear and being a subject of discrimination experienced by the migrants. As for Turkey, the Armenian migrants do not think that much of a security, rather than of avoidance of risks. They are aware about the dangers that may occur in a megapolis of a 16 million people, therefore they warn each other about thefts, attacks and other possible dangers.

Male migrants usually act as "protectors" of their families, so even if they do not work, their presence in Turkey is thus justified. They deem to be the protectors of their families and perceived national identity and pride.

*"Of course I prefer working my head down, not meddling into other's business, moreover politics. But if someone insults me or my family, I will show them their place, no matter what, even if they deport me after that." G, 26, male, jewelry craftsmanship*

Another issue is the **subconscious fear and cautiousness** about revealing own ethnic identity that both Armenian migrants and Bolsahay community have. Perhaps not displayed explicitly and hidden deep in the subconscious of an oppressed minority, Armenians prefer not to be identified, unless they feel comfortable among their circle. This fear indeed creates subconscious isolation from the rest of the society and insecurity in the shared urban space. Interestingly enough, while other migrant and

refugee groups in Istanbul want their problems to be voiced out and heard in the Turkish society, Armenian migrants prefer to be invisible and keep low profile.

***Observation:** In March 2018, with some friends from Armenia we had an in-house gathering in an apartment in Şişli. The door rang and there was a person informing on some residential errands of the building. Hearing our vivid chat from the room, the person (apparently an Armenian himself) said dryly: "This is Turkey, don't speak Armenian so loudly".*

The topic of **discrimination** for Armenian migrants in Istanbul has two facets – discrimination in Armenia and discrimination in Turkey. An Armenian citizen's migration to Turkey is not viewed positively in Armenia, at least before the last few years. Migration to "enemy" Turkey is viewed as a "betrayal" of national pride, not justified under any circumstances. In this context women (especially young ones) are much more targeted and vulnerable. As Salomoni (2014) rightly denotes, the young women are stigmatized, primarily for moral reasons. They are "accused of working as prostitutes and with the aggravating circumstance of doing so with Turks". However, with more migrations and wider exchange of information flows, Turkey is slowly being perceived as a regular destination for labor migration among certain layers of Armenian society.

*"Everyone knows what we are doing in Turkey. They [people in Armenia] are already getting used to it. No one blames us for coming to Turkey."  
M, female, 38, cleaning lady*

When asked about being discriminated in Turkey, the migrants mostly deny such incidents at the first place. However, given a longer time for conversation, they recount various forms of discrimination that they came across in their daily lives. The recounts of these incidents of discrimination are quite internalized, similar to the above mentioned internalized fear and cautiousness, "because there is no safe space to adequately express and articulate these experiences" (Kasbarian 2016).

## Migrant Spaces of Interaction

The presence of Armenian migrants in Istanbul not only creates a space for interaction between Bolsahay community and migrants, but also creates migrant specific spaces embedded in larger Istanbulite society. Some spaces of migrants' social interaction keep allegiance to the "classical" spaces where Bolsahay community is involved (church, schools, unions). However, there are other migrant-specific spaces, where Bolsahay community is not involved. In these relatively new, independent and few localities Armenian migrants maintain interaction with each other, as well as with other migrant groups. Some migrant-specific spaces are created as a result of their social mobility, but also as a response to the existing social boundaries (irregular status, uneven distribution of resources and opportunities).

■ **Church.** Church is the most common locality that Istanbul Armenians and migrants share. In fact, many informants of the report were identified at churches. Kumkapı, hosting the seat of the Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul, also hosts the Patriarchal Church of Holy Mother of God<sup>8</sup>, and the Church of St. Harutyun (Resurrection) where many migrants attend Sunday services and religious fests. In Kurtuluş neighborhood migrants can be observed at Feriköy St. Vardanants Church. As accurately observed by H. Papazian (REPAIR Armeno-Turkish Platform 2017), the identity of Bolsahay community is rather ethno-religious, while the identity of the migrants is anchored in the statehood of Armenia, its ideology and norms. Thus, many migrants reported that they do not regularly attend church, as they do not consider themselves religious. However, by attending church they feel relieved and find consolation. For the generation of Armenian migrants that grew up during Soviet times when churches were abolished, being among Bolsahay community is a rediscovery of Christian Armenian traditions (Paksoy 2017). After Sunday service, Istanbul's Armenian churches

<sup>8</sup> An interesting observation was made at the Patriarchal church, where every Sunday, after the Armenian service, Ethiopian migrants do their prayers. This is due to the allegiance of the Ethiopian and Armenian churches.

usually offer breakfasts to everyone in the church community, but these gatherings are not widely attended by migrants.

*Observation: After the Christmas service at Feriköy Church on 6th January, I decided to attend the church breakfast. Soon, at the breakfast hall, I realized that majority of the attendees are Istanbul Armenians. Moreover, when I asked for a clarification about a certain event, a lady responded "Here's a Hayasdantsi (Armenian from Armenia) and she has a question".*

- **Schools.** At present there are 17 Armenian schools in Istanbul for pre-primary, primary and secondary education (Armenian Patriarchate of Turkey 2018) that fall under the status of special schools of officially recognized minorities (Armenians, Rums and Jews) in Turkey. In these schools the mother tongue of the minority can be used for instruction (Kaya 2015), which is Western Armenian dialect in the case of Armenian schools. As for enrollment, the official minority schools accept children who are registered as a representative of the minority group and whose parents are Turkish citizens. In 2012, by making an amendment to the Regulation on Private Education Institutions (Ministry of National Education 2012), the Turkish Government allowed the children belonging to the same minority, but who are not Turkish citizens, attend the minority schools as guest students. This attendance form, however, does not allow the guest students receive a school report card at the end of the year (Kaya 2015).

In 2000s, in line with the changing socio-demographic profile of the Armenian migrants in Istanbul (family and youth migrations), there was an emerging need for educational attainment of children of migrants. Those children who moved into Turkey with their parent(s) or were born to migrant parents needed education, however the above-mentioned enrollment regulations of the minority schools and the children's linguistic knowledge (the children of Armenian migrants speak/write in Eastern Armenian dialect, which is different from the Western Armenian one) limited

the options of migrant children to attain formal education. With the initiative of several Armenian migrants a private pedagogical group was organized to provide educational training to the children, allowing their parents to work and not bother for the essential literacy of their children. Over the time this group grew into an informal school responding to the growing need of parents to enroll more children of different ages and with different educational needs. A private space was allocated to the school team around Gedikpaşa neighborhood to accommodate the children. The school, which was later named after Hrant Dink, currently serves to around 150 children (including of kindergarten age). The school follows the exact curricula of the Republic of Armenia, where students learn Armenian, English, Russian languages and other subjects. The school mainly operates through school fees, however for certain vulnerable families the fee is negotiated. The conditions of the school space are unfavorable and maximized to the possible capacity of makeshift classrooms. Though crowded and small, the school follows all the formalities of a regular school, but at the same time reminds of a big family. Teachers know the trajectories of each child's family and show utmost care and attention towards them. The Ministry of Education and Science of Armenia allows the graduates of the school to attain a graduation certificate once the students pass final exams in Armenia. As for the Turkish authorities, the existence of the school is well known to them, however they condone and do not challenge its activities.

Besides the above described realities, there are migrant parents who choose to enroll their children in the formal Armenian schools of Istanbul, which slowly changes the "demographic pattern" of the traditional schools of Istanbul's Armenian community.

For the parents the schools provide a space for information exchange on daily routine subjects, but also some of them receive support or advice from the school personnel on issues related to administrative paperwork or health issues.

*"Our school is very supportive. I am relaxed to know that my child is in good hands. Even if my work lasts long, they [the teachers] will stay at school, until the last kid is picked up." A, female, 32, cleaner*

- **Businesses.** The ethnic businesses are very few but emerging in the vast economic picture of Istanbul. These spaces not only ensure the migrants' income, but also serve as a networking platform for ethnic kinship, family and friends. These localities do not appear up, unless you are a migrant yourself and you are determined to find such ethnic businesses. These spaces incorporate Armenian migrants, other groups of migrants and occasionally Turks, but almost never the Bolsahay community. The report identified a few examples of Armenian migrants' businesses and will elaborate around them:

**1) Shop** – this shop was identified in Kumkapı, amidst an open-air market, taking place every Thursday in the neighborhood. While checking the makeshift trade tables with various items from post-Soviet republics and showing deep interest, the traders advised me to check a small shop nearby for more variety. It took me some time to find the very small shop with no specific name on it. I went in and appeared in a room full of various goods from post-Soviet countries. Several people were sitting at the table-cash desk, who did not show any interest in my entry and did not say welcome (not typical behavior at any Turkish shop). I understood that if anyone appeared in that shop, then they knew what they want. The shop caters not only Armenian migrants, but also those from post-Soviet countries. People dropped in, exchanged a few words, a few jokes, discussed foreign currency rates, shared plans about next trade batch and left.

**2) Beauty salon**– I appeared at this salon through constantly asking my female informants if there is an Armenian hairdresser in Istanbul. Located very close to Aksaray international bus station, in one of the residential buildings, this Armenian-run beauty salon mostly caters Armenian migrants and those from the post-Soviet space. Spending one hour in

the salon decorated with wallpapers depicting Paris, I met ladies from Georgia, Chechnya, Armenia and heard their stories. This was the place where these migrants would discuss any routine issues, discounts at certain shops, or recount old good times in their home countries.

**3) Café-pastry shop** – This is an interesting example of an ethnic business, established in 2016 in Kumkapı. The café-shop, bearing the name "Ureni" (meaning willow tree), is decorated with a wallpaper featuring Armenian placenames. The offered menu includes a wide variety of pastries and light dishes typical to Armenia (pastries like Gata, "Napoleon" layered honey cakes, etc.). One can even find bottled pear lemonade of Ureni brand, tasting exactly like the ones in Armenia. On certain holidays, the café invites its customers to taste specific Armenian dishes (like Khash, barbeque) and listen to some live music. The customers of the café are people of any nationality living in the neighborhood.

The above-mentioned spaces indeed are not the only localities where the migrants interact - much common are family and friend circles, or public spaces where migrants meet each other. It will be interesting to observe how the presence of migrants throughout years will create new spaces and new realms in Istanbul, without any fear of being called "Armenian".

*"Turkish friends? There are Turkish people with whom my work is related, but that's it... Well, I don't even have time to go out. On my only day-off I am either at home or with my Armenian friends. I don't even go to the church often." R, male, 42, trader*

## Perceptions among "Armenia Armenians" and "Istanbul Armenians"

According to the report's observation, the notion that there are contradictions and even animosity between Armenian migrants and Bolsahay community is rather a public perception than a personal experience. Migrants usually talked about "us" and "them", but

when asked to recount a personal confrontation with Bolsahays, they had difficulty to do so. The contradictions break down to very routine and trivial cultural differences, which are interesting but not essential.

*"The daily routine and habits of Istanbul Armenians are very different from ours. Come on, ours is much better, our cuisine is much better... [me trying to help collect the coffee cups from the table] Please leave those, you are a guest... See? Will we ever allow our guest to bother for anything? Feel free like at your own home, my girl, put aside formalities." A, female, 52, trader*

*"Istanbul Armenians are very different from us. They are absolutely cut from the reality of Armenia. When they ask me questions, like "Do you have this? Do you know what is this or that?" I get angry. I invite all of them to visit Armenia, so I can show them what is Armenia and true Armenian hospitality." V, female, 56, caregiver*

*"Well, yeah, there are differences in language, but for me Western Armenian is understandable. Sometimes my patrons forget how to say something in Armenian, so I'm teaching them our version [Eastern Armenian]. For other things... come on! Anyone is human, also Turks are human, so we can find common language." T, female, 58, housemaid*

## Researcher's Personal Stance

As an Armenian being in Turkey for the first time, preparation of this report has been an intensive and memorable journey for me. Initially aiming not to "discover" the already existing realities, I started to look for the gaps of knowledge or emerging patterns in the dynamically developing

picture of the Armenian migrants in Istanbul. My aim was to come up with recommendations and ideas for future research, policies and programmes addressed to stakeholders from both countries.

Besides actively attending and observing the localities where I could meet migrants, I indulged in my favorite activity – making big observations on small incidents. Sometimes the meetings and incidents were impressive and solid, sometimes – funny and lighthearted, sometimes – sad and clueless... All this process was difficult both physically and emotionally, I recall myself being totally devastated after some encounters with people who appeared in the deadlock of unjust and harsh situations.

The migrants usually expected me to be in Istanbul for job or marriage. After stating that I am in Istanbul for neither of those reasons and overcoming their suspicious looks, I was easily involved into conversation. Being "one of them", I could easily shift between an insider and outsider. Except for several cases of avoidance, the migrants usually welcomed me and told much more than I would ask for. After seeing that I am not there to judge them, they would trust me their stories, but add at the end: "You will not put us in a danger, won't you?"

...April 1, 2018, Easter Sunday morning. While sitting in my room in Kurtuluş, ignorant to any noise from outside, the sound of a familiar language caught my attention. A voice of a middle-aged Armenian lady talking on the phone from the balcony: "You see, I cannot talk from inside, he's an old sick man, I cannot talk loud in his presence. So what's up? Did you go to church already? ...Listen, mom, are you taking your pills?...What pot? I told you to use that old pot to color eggs. Can you do anything properly without me?! (angry tone) How come you cannot find it?! Give the phone to Ani (probably daughter) I will explain her where it is. You cannot do anything without me!" ...And so it unfolds, the existential existence of the Armenian migrants in Istanbul.

## Photo Gallery<sup>9</sup>

### Tracing Armenian Community and Migrants in Kumkapı and Kurtuluş

The presence of Armenian migrants is visually not striking in Kumkapı, instead it is easy to catch up an Armenian conversation in various dialects of the language just strolling the streets or walking into

the shops. Among the few visual reminders of the Armenian migrant presence are the call shops and cargo services featuring Armenian flag and a few ethnic businesses with distinguished Armenian names.

Compared to Kumkapı, the streets of Kurtuluş are more marked by memory, messages and graffiti, often conveying the emotional yearnings of the migrants and/or Bolsahay community. In a city where it is preferred to go unnoticed about your ethnic Armenian identity, the walls of the buildings are used to anonymously express thoughts.

The below pictures depict the minority and migrant backgrounds of the neighborhoods.



Graffiti writing on one of the buildings in Kurtuluş, Sişli: "insanlar gider" (people go).



Writing in Armenian on a building wall in Kurtuluş, Sişli: "Good morning, Mrs. Arus...". These are song lyrics of a famous Armenian bard-songwriter Ruben Hakhverdyan, addressing to an old lady, Arus, who was left alone after her husband died and children left abroad. "Good morning, Mrs. Arus – your laundry has dried, in your hopeless gaze your tears have dried...", continues the song.

(link to the song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtnjK7OLUtg>)

<sup>9</sup> Photos are taken by the author unless other source is mentioned.



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Writing in Armenian on a building wall in Kurtuluş, Şişli: "Where were you, God?". These are words from a song of another famous bard-songwriter famous in Armenia, Arthur Meschian. The song has the following text: "Where were you, God, when a whole abandoned nation became mad?".

(link to the song:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hixBxxZ4tLA>)



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Writing in Armenian on a building wall in Kurtuluş, Şişli: "Where is our home?..."

Photo taken in February 2018



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In April 2018, an answer was added to the rhetorical question: "It's in Tattavla"



One of the backstreets in Kurtuluş neighborhood

(Photo source: <https://culinarybackstreets.com/special-category/2018/going-deep-3/>)



Various food and drinks from Armenia and other post-Soviet countries sold by migrants on a pavement of a street in Şişli.



"Ureni" is a café-pastry shop established in 2016 in Kumkapı. The cafe features pastries and dishes typical to Armenia.



Pastries and lemonade produced by the café-shop.



One of the numerous call shops in Kumkapı.

Ivan Cargo in Kumkapı. A typical Russian name implies the destinations of the cargo service.



Announcement of a rented apartment and room for foreigners in Kumkapı.

A boy carrying a load in one of the streets of Laleli.

(Photo source:  
<http://www.age-of-migration.com/resources/essays/kumkapi/>)



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An office of a cargo service for Armenia, bearing an Armenian name Smbat. Below is a cargo service for Uzbekistan.



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One of the streets in Kumkapı.



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One of the streets of Gedikpaşa, known for its shoe industry and trade.



Aksaray bus station from where the Istanbul-Yerevan buses depart (source of the upper photo:

<https://avtobus.wordpress.com/>).



Inside St. Harutyun Armenian Church of Kumkapı.



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*Painting class at the informal school attended by the children of Armenian migrants.*



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*The Patriarchal (main) Armenian Church of St. Mother of God (Meyrem Ana) in Kumkapi.*



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*An Uzbek stall, with traditional Uzbek bread and food, at one of the migrant markets in Kumkapi.*



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*Traditional Thursday open market in Kumkapi, where locals and various migrant groups sell their product and goods.*

## Recommendations

Istanbul is a transforming and transformative city: it is transforming at a wild pace of a crowded megapolis, but at the same time it is leaving transformative marks on those individuals who choose to live there. Today Istanbul is a space where new Armenian-Turkish contacts and dialogues are taking shape, and migrants unintentionally take an active participation in it. With this report, presenting the realities of Armenian migrants in Istanbul, we hope to create a space for initiating Armenian-Turkish dialogue where migrants have a relevant role.

The purpose of this report was to identify the gaps of knowledge and emerging patterns in the dynamically developing picture of the Armenian migrants in Istanbul. Deriving from the data analysis and general overview, the following recommendations are made addressed to academicians, civil society and policy makers on the need of future research and actions.

- **Creation of non-formal migrant association.** This idea initially comes from one of the migrants based in Istanbul. Since there is no probability that any formal institution on both sides of the border will take over a responsibility to provide support to migrants, it will be a good solution that migrants self-organize within such a non-formal association. Indeed, the regularity status of the migrants matters here, however there always will be informed and active migrants who can act as informants and emergency focal points for others in need, as well as organize support networks within their capacity.
- **Identification of potential support institutions.** Observe the potential of formal institutions/organizations in Turkey (civil society, aid, consultancy, education) that could possibly support certain groups of migrants (e.g. children, women, elderly). Indeed, in this case the regularity status of the migrants again defines a lot, however there can be options to engage the migrants in the support projects/initiatives of the aforementioned institutions.
- **Understanding the rights violations and support mechanisms for Armenian children in Turkey.**

Conduct research on the post-graduation life choices of the children who studied in formal and non-formal Armenian schools of Istanbul. Evaluate their educational and career possibilities. Investigate the cases of child labor and undocumented birth certificates in case of Armenian migrants. Deriving from the outcomes of the research, suggest recommendations to the concerned schools and authorities.

- **Identification of health issues among migrants affected by poverty cycle.** Conduct a research on the reasons and consequences of health issues among immigrants of concern, especially those whose health has deteriorated throughout their migration experience due to unfavorable housing and employment conditions. Suggest possible solutions for social rights, health treatment and poverty alleviation.
- **Updated knowledge on laws/regulations concerning immigration and foreigners in Turkey.** Compile an informative database on the recent laws and regulations regarding migrant/foreigner rights and restrictions in Turkey. Clarify if there are any differentiations as per citizenship and ethnicity. Make information clear and available to migrants.
- **Optimization of social support/resources of ethnic networks.** Identify the resources that are embedded in Istanbul Armenian community that can be potentially optimized for the need of migrants. Those resources may be material and non-material.
- **Obtain knowledge on new groups of migrants.** Conduct research on male, youth, and family migrations to holistically understand the socio-demographic picture of the Armenian migrants in Istanbul. Research marriage migration, as an emerging practice and a networking precedent between Armenians and Istanbul Armenians and/or other groups.
- **Understand the trends of ethnic entrepreneurship.** Study the patterns of Armenian entrepreneurship in Istanbul. Identify the role of Istanbul Armenians, Turks and other groups in supporting or limiting the migrant entrepreneurship.

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