

Many young Americans want to build a new Armenia

By Roy
Gutman



On the road to Armenia's border with Georgia, there are scores of derelict factories, which were stripped of their content in the period of privatization after Armenia, once a Soviet republic, became an independent state in 1991.
ROY GUTMAN — McClatchy

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YEREVAN, Armenia — Derelict factories dot the landscape in Armenia, remnants of a failed privatization process after the Soviet Union's collapse gave birth to an independent nation. Outside the capital, towns are run-down, villages depopulated and the farmland fallow, with only a third of the arable land cultivated.



That's only the start of the catalog of woes that young Armenians cite about their landlocked, isolated homeland.



Like Ukraine, Armenia was part of the Soviet Union. But unlike Ukraine, which staged a revolution to avoid Russian domination, Armenia joined the Russian-sponsored [Eurasian Economic Union](#), and although it has no border with Russia, Russia is a big presence. Russian troops patrol Armenia's closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan, and Russian interests control the railroads and the telecommunication, energy and mining sectors.

Western sanctions imposed on Russia after it annexed Crimea are a factor as well. Remittances from workers in Russia, the main place of employment for Armenians who leave the country to work, are down as that economy reels from the sanctions and the drop in oil prices.

Even the population of Armenia is unclear. Officials say it's 3,020,000, citing the last census in 2010, but independent

observers think it's between 2 million and 2.5 million, falling annually as tens of thousands depart to find work abroad.

Yet there's a bright spot: Young North Americans of Armenian descent are still flocking to the country – taking up citizenship, starting high-tech companies or going into local politics.

One reason for their interest is the country's educated workforce, and a tradition of tech-savviness that dates to when Armenia was known as the Silicon Valley of the Soviet Union.

The new arrivals come with the background of the Armenian exodus from the Anatolian peninsula 100 years ago, when their ancestors were expelled from what today is Turkey to other parts of the then-disintegrating Ottoman Empire that now lie in Syria and Iraq. Most historians call what followed a genocide; it's 100th anniversary is being commemorated worldwide on Friday.

Raffi Elliott, 26, grew up in Montreal, the son of an Armenian mother who was born in Aleppo, Syria, and an Irish father. His great-grandfather, from Gurun in central Anatolia, was deported on foot to Aleppo and was rescued from the desert by Franciscan monks.

Elliott took advantage of a tax break in Armenia for new tech companies and established Nest Innovations, a startup that creates websites for small businesses around the world. "The local economy doesn't affect me much," he said. "I get paid in dollars or euros, and I pay in (Armenian) dram."

Babken DerGregorian, 29, got his citizenship papers two weeks ago so that he could take part in local politics. From near Glendale in Southern California, he's the son of Armenians from Iran. A political science graduate of University of California at Los Angeles and later the London School of Economics, he worked on one of President Barack Obama's campaigns in Florida and arrived here in 2012 to work for a human rights organization.

"There's a whole new generation that says, 'These are my rights.' It's very much an American approach," he said. "I was politically active. I got arrested a number of times. I decided to get Armenian citizenship. If I'm going to be politically active, there is a way as an Armenian citizen to want my rights."

Elliott also spent a night in jail, for holding up a sign that read "Armenia is not for sale" during a visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Adrineh Gregorian, 37, from Los Angeles, also is here to stay. She's a filmmaker whose great-grandfather is from the same Anatolian town as Elliott's. But hers went through a second deportation, from northern Syria to Deir el Zour in the Syrian desert. He was rescued and taken to Beirut, Lebanon, and then later moved to Tehran. She was the first member of her family to visit Gurun in 2011, and she produced "[Back to Gurun](#)," a documentary about the mixed reception she got there.

She may have found her calling in health education training and women's empowerment after producing "Enough," a film about the practice in Armenia, second only to China, of women aborting female fetuses. She says she's shown the film in 100 villages as part of a project for female empowerment and had a warm welcome everywhere.

In her travels she's observed the decline of village life. "The villages are at most one-third the size they were 18 years ago," she said. With the men working abroad, the villages are dominated by women and children. She blamed the government for failing to support rural agriculture.

The younger generation returning here, known locally as "repats," may number as many as 25,000 – a small percentage of the Armenian diaspora, which at an estimated 11 million outnumbers Armenia's population by a factor of four. But they're a crucial addition to the local economy, which also benefited from their parents' and grandparents' generations.

Diaspora Armenians teaching in the California university system conceived the [American University of Armenia](#), the country's dominant university. Edward Avedisian, a former clarinetist with the Boston Symphony, and his wife,

Pamela, donated \$8 million for a state-of-the-art classroom building that opened in 2012. Billionaire Eduardo Eurnekian, said to be the second wealthiest man in Argentina, has poured investment money into Armenian agriculture, including wine growing, and the Yerevan airport.

Kirk Kerkorian, the billionaire Fresno native and former head of MGM, contributed over \$1 billion to Armenia through his now-defunct Lincy Foundation, including some \$210 million to develop the country's infrastructure. Kerkorian's family emigrated from Elazig in central Anatolia before the genocide.

Sam Simonyans, of Dallas, contributed over \$40 million to set up the [Tumo Center](#), a tuition-free high-tech training facility for youths 12 to 18 in Yerevan.

Vasken Kalayjian, an American-Armenian, was asked by the Armenian government to propose ways to "rebrand" the country. He heads the New York-based GK Brand, which specializes in rebranding companies and organizations the world over.

One of his goals is to get Armenia to move beyond the drive for recognition of the 1915 massacres and deportations as genocide.

"If you haven't noticed, nobody gives a damn," he told an audience at the [United World College in Dilijan](#), a spa town in northern Armenia – a new institution sponsored by diaspora Armenians from Russia, the U.S. and Ukraine. "For 100 years, you've been trying to convince Turkey and the United States to accept the Armenian genocide, and how far has it gotten you?"

He said Armenia needed a new image as a can-do country.

That, said Vigen Sargsyan, the chief of staff to Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, fits into the country's goals. This week's commemoration of the 1915 events has four "pillars": "revival and renaissance" of the country, remembering those killed and the heritage stolen, gratitude to those who helped save Armenian lives and joining efforts to prevent genocide.

"He was not saying we should forget the genocide, but find a different way to present our story," Vigen Sargsyan said. He is not related to the president.

Still, the organization of Friday's commemoration has left many in the younger generation cold.

"It's a badly organized PR campaign of hollow political substance and hollow relevance to the current needs of Armenia and humankind in general," said Anna Shahnazaryan, 30, a civic activist.

She noted that the poster advertising the events of April 24 carried the motto "I remember and demand."

"But it does not say what do we demand and from whom?" she said. She described it as "meaningless nationalist propaganda."

Email: rgutman@mcclatchydc.com; Twitter: [@roygutmanmcc](https://twitter.com/roygutmanmcc).