

Between Civil Society and Ethnic Nationalism: An Ethnographic Perspective on the Decolonization of Contemporary Armenia

For years, Armenia was considered Russia's most loyal ally, both due to their shared history and strong political and economic dependencies. Russia served as Armenia's security guarantor, while Moscow played a key role in maintaining the country's stability. However, this relationship began to change, particularly after the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. The separatist region, which had functioned under Russia's protective umbrella for three decades, ceased to exist, and Moscow—much to the Armenians' disappointment—failed to provide sufficient military and political support. This event became a turning point, sparking a wave of anti-Russian sentiment and prompting the government in Yerevan to seek new international partners.

A symbolic step in this direction was the signing of a strategic agreement between Armenia and the United States on January 14, 2025. This document clearly signalled Armenia's intent to reduce its dependence on Russia and strengthen cooperation with the West, including the European Union and France.

Following this political shift, Armenia's national identity has also been evolving. For decades, Armenian nationalism was primarily ethnic in nature—it was rooted in a shared history, culture, and language. However, under the leadership of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who has been in power since 2018, it has started to shift toward a more civic nationalism, emphasizing democratic values, the rule of law, and international cooperation. Armenia is becoming increasingly engaged with Western institutions, which in turn weakens the influence of radical ethnic nationalism.

It is within this context that my research project, *Between Civil Society and Ethnic Nationalism: An Ethnographic Perspective on the Decolonization of Contemporary Armenia*, is situated. Its aim is to analyse the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Armenia's decolonization process. I examine how they shape post-imperial identity, construct decolonial narratives, and whether they actively challenge post-Soviet political and economic structures. I explore the initiatives they undertake in support of democracy and human rights, as well as the challenges they face regarding nationalism and external influences.

I am particularly interested in the concrete role that NGOs play in Armenia's decolonization after 2020. Are they truly the driving force behind these changes? Do they serve as platforms for building a new national identity, free from Russian influence? Or do they encounter strong resistance from conservative and pro-Russian circles, which accuse them of advancing Western interests and imposing foreign values?

I approach the decolonization process from multiple perspectives. On one hand, it is seen as an emancipatory movement aimed at liberating Armenia from post-Soviet influence. In this view, NGOs play a key role in promoting national sovereignty, democracy, and human rights. On the other hand, the process is highly controversial. Conservative and pro-Russian groups accuse NGOs, particularly those funded by Western foundations, of being tools of neocolonialism and serving external actors.

My conclusions are based on ethnographic research conducted in Armenia. I observe NGO activities and their interactions with various social groups, participate in events organized by activists, and conduct in-depth interviews with NGO leaders, experts, and community members. A crucial aspect of my work is also the analysis of decolonial narratives in social media and online discourse.

The results of my research are published in academic papers, public lectures, and a dedicated website where I share key findings. I also collaborate with international research institutions to compare Armenia's decolonization processes with similar experiences in other countries. My goal is to better understand the role of NGOs in shaping Armenia's new identity, their strategies for redefining relations with Russia, and their contribution to broader decolonization movements in the region.