AZERBAIJANIS IN RUSSIA: AN IMAGINED DIASPORA?1

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The term diaspora2 is one that has been widely used over the past 30 years. Complex transnational boundaries, human migration, and political changes have caused many groups with various destinies to be labeled “diasporas”—which include ethnic minorities, immigrant laborers, refugees, asylum seekers, and gastarbeiter. One can even come across groups calling themselves the film enthusiasts’ diaspora, the Breton diaspora, or the virtual diaspora.3 Indeed, the term has become so universal that some now regard diasporas as an obsolete phenomenon.4 In Russia, the word diaspora bears a specific meaning related to the population displacements caused directly or indirectly by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Surprisingly enough, it now refers both to ethnic Russians who did not return to Russia after 1991,5 as well as to the immigrant communities that settled in the Russian Federation after the end of the Soviet Union.

There are countless ways of naming immigrants in Russian. The word migrant is the most commonly used, by scholars, journalists, and the public alike; but the German version gastarbeiter is also quite popular to refer to temporary migrants. There are other specific Russian terms, too, the very semantic construction of which illustrates the ambivalent attitude of both the local population and Russian authorities toward immigrants. This is the case for the terms priezzhaiushchie, meaning literally “those who are coming” or en route,6 and priekhavshie, “those who have arrived,”

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1 The expression “imagined community” is used by Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London, New York: Verso, 2006).
2 S. Dufoix, Diasporas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 1.
5 These ethnic Russians are more commonly referred to as sootechestvenniki, literally meaning compatriots, even if the word “diaspora” can also be used. See I. Zevelev, Russia and its New Diasporas (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2001), 142.
6 Present and past participles are very rich grammatical forms in Russian. They have been transformed into nouns to refer to a group of people.
as if distinguishing whether the migrants are staying in Russia on a temporary or permanent basis.\(^7\)

Diaspora, in Russian discourse, is a flexible enough term to include immigrants bearing the same “nationality,”\(^8\) regardless of their citizenship or the duration of their stay in Russia.\(^9\) Yet, it has a rather disparaging connotation—when associated with an adjective referring to some nationalities, for instance the “Azerbaijani diaspora,” it becomes nearly synonymous with “mafia.”\(^10\) This chapter intends to use the term diaspora in its widest possible sense, so as to properly address the transnational dynamics that affect Azerbaijani immigrants in Russia from an economic (namely money transfers), affective, and cultural point of view. It will also be stressed that whereas these immigrants do not share a “diasporic” self-consciousness, at least in the traditional sense of the term, their home country is actually making efforts to build what can be described as an “imagined diaspora.”

### Diaspora or Diasporas?

The word diaspora\(^11\) has acquired a wider meaning than the one traditionally given to it, as a response to the failure of assimilation and integration theories, according to which immigrants were supposed to lose their identity and adopt local norms while maintaining a strong ethnic identity and feeling of community.

The term diaspora does not sound ambiguous when used to refer to the Jewish diaspora. Taking its source from the Greek language to qualify the Aeginetan people’s exile,\(^12\) it has been translated in Hebrew as *galut* to

\(^{7}\) In a far less polished style, one can also hear, depending on the people met, the word *ponaeckhavshie*, which could be translated very informally as “those who got their butts over here.”

\(^{8}\) This word is used in the present article according to its Soviet meaning, i.e. their ethnic belonging.

\(^{9}\) The use of the word “diaspora” generally has an equalizing effect on the people to which it refers or is supposed to refer. See Dufoix, *Diasporas*, 60.

\(^{10}\) The same negative meaning is sometimes applied to other people, but it does not originate from the majority group among the already settled population, like in Creole. See L. Green Basch, N. Glick Schiller, and C. Szanton-Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Post-Colonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publ., 1994), 271.
