

Armenia's Multicultural Mother

Author: [Karine Ter-Sahakian](#)

Larisa Ovsepian's 14 adopted children come from diverse ethnic backgrounds - and advancing old age won't stop her adopting more.

The largest family in Yerevan - and probably the whole of the country - has 14 children. They live in a four-room basement flat in the centre of the Armenian capital.

Larisa Ovsepian's family is not only large, but also incredibly diverse. As well as several Armenians, it includes an Estonian, a Ukrainian, a Russian and two Africans. One of them, 15-year-old Grant, was born in Congo and dreams of singing the lead role in Verdi's *Othello* one day in the Yerevan Opera House. But for now, he's happy to sing Armenian folk songs.

"I began adopting children 25 years ago," the mother of this noisy and - all things considered - happy family told IWPR.

"My personal life went all wrong. I had no children, and my husband and I had divorced. I decided to start a family on my own and began to ask around if any of the Yerevan prostitutes were about to give birth.

"I mainly find my kids in orphanages. That's where I found Anahit, who at 22, is a mother herself now. She married another of my adopted babies, an Estonian."

Larisa's children come from eight different ethnic backgrounds, making hers an extraordinary household in a homogeneous country such as Armenia, where minorities make up only four per cent of the population. She gives them all Armenian names, saying this will make it easier for them to adapt socially.

A charming four-year-old boy opened the door and introduced himself right away, saying, "I'm Ashot. Are you here to see Mum?"

Linda, who is named after an American friend who supplies Larisa's children with clothing, talks about life in this enormous family. "We yell and fight sometimes, but Mama Larisa eventually makes us friends again," she said.

All of the children are dressed well in clean, mostly new clothes and Larisa even gives clothes away to many of the less fortunate Armenian families in the neighbourhood. "All children are entitled to a happy childhood and it's not up to the government to decide who's right and who's wrong," she said.

The Ovsepian family are a famous family in Yerevan, known by everyone from the president's office to hospital nurses - but most of the limited help they receive comes from private friends and donors.

The law provides for a monthly allowance of five US dollars per each underage child. In Armenia, that is enough to buy bread for a week. This family however needs 25 loaves of bread a day.

"I decided not to take the state benefit, as it is never paid on time and does not make any difference

anyway. We have already run up a debt of 2,000 dollars for bread over the past year. I just cannot pay it back," Larisa told IWPR.

"Fortunately, we don't have to pay for electricity or the telephone. The Armenian Nuclear Power Plant covers electricity costs for us, and well-wishers pay our phone bill."

There is a television and a piano in the house, but no one reads the newspapers in this family or takes any interest in national or international affairs. "What difference does it make who the president is or what the laws are," said Anahit, the eldest daughter. "This has nothing to do with our lives. The main thing is that Mama Larisa stays healthy. And we can earn our own money."

Two of the elder boys are serving in the army and most of the older children have jobs of one sort or another. Higher education, with the high costs involved, is simply out of the question for most of them.

It turns out Larisa Ovsepiyan is not even an Armenian citizen. "When they were exchanging old Soviet passports for new ones, I had no money. But I don't want it - I never vote and I'm raising my kids alone. What do I need citizenship for?"

Mama Larisa generally adopts her babies soon after birth, making it easier for both them and her to get used to each other. She does not take children who have run away from Armenia's orphanages and are selling flowers or begging on the streets of Yerevan, as they seldom want to live by her rules. "This is a family, not a homeless shelter. There are a few 'family' orphanages around for them to go to."

However four of her brood did find their way to Larisa's house themselves.

They include her two African children - Grant from Congo and Gayane from Ethiopia - who came to Armenia from Russia, were told her address by a migration department official and just turned up at the door one day.

The two don't say how they got to Yerevan, but it seems they travelled a hard road. In his old passport, Grant's last name was Tomkin, and his first name was also different, but he now has new identity documents.

Grant, who is now 15, has a beautiful voice and has a talent for singing Armenian folk songs. He has already given one public concert - although as his voice is breaking, he has stopped singing for a while.

He was offered a lucrative job as a restaurant singer, but his mother vetoed it and he was not sure he wanted it anyway, preferring to set his sights on the opera house. "If I sing now, I'll be useless a couple of years later. And I don't want to sing in a restaurant. I've worked as a waiter and I just don't like the atmosphere," he said.

Unsurprisingly, Larisa Ovsepiyan stands out from her neighbours. "She has to be mad to burden herself with so many kids without a husband," said one, Naira Hairapetian. "I would never do something like that. I'm struggling to raise one child, but look at her - she's got 14!"

Others accuse Larisa of using her children as an advertising and fundraising tool, which she refutes, saying, "I don't care what people say. Every woman has her own life to live. My husband and I didn't have kids and when we divorced, I thought to myself so many children are suffering without parents and love. As

for money-raising, our entire income is 100 dollars a month."

Everything is fine so long as Larisa is healthy and able to take care of things. But she's over 60 years old now and, although she is still sprightly, sometimes a note of despair enters her voice. "My whole life is in these fourteen pairs of eyes," she says and then adds, "If someone knocked on my door right now to give me another baby to raise, I'd take it."

Karine Ter-Sahakian is a journalist with Respublika Armenia newspaper in Yerevan.

Location: Stavropol
Russia
North Ossetia
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