

Forced Displacement: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in the South Caucasus

Journal Issue**Author(s):**

Heinrich, Andreas; Dinev, Ivaylo; Douglas, Nadja; Guliyev, Farid; Chikhladze, Tatia

Publication date:

2025-01

Permanent link:


<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000712914>

Rights / license:

In Copyright - Non-Commercial Use Permitted

Originally published in:

Caucasus Analytical Digest (CAD) 140



caucasus analytical digest

<https://laender-analysen.de/cad>
<https://css.ethz.ch/en/publications/cad.html>

FORCED DISPLACEMENT: REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Special Editor: Andreas Heinrich

■ INTRODUCTION BY THE SPECIAL EDITOR

Forced Migration and Displacement: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in the South Caucasus 2

Andreas Heinrich (Research Centre for East European Studies and Collaborative Research Center 1342 'Global Dynamics of Social Policy' at the University of Bremen)

■ ANALYSIS

The Political and Cultural Future of Karabakh Armenians 4
Ivaylo Dinev, Nadja Douglas (both Centre for East European and International Studies, ZOiS)

■ ANALYSIS

Durable Solutions and Return of IDPs in Azerbaijan 13
Farid Guliyev (American University in Dubai, UAE)

■ ANALYSIS

Georgia's State Policy for IDP Integration in the View of IDPs 20
Tatia Chikhladze (Regional Institute for Security Studies, Tbilisi, and British Teaching University of Georgia)

This publication has been produced in the context of the Collaborative Research Centre 1342 'Global Dynamics of Social Policy' at the University of Bremen which is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation)—Project Number 374666841—SFB 1342.

The Caucasus Analytical Digest is an open access publication.

You can subscribe to free e-mail alerts for new issues at

<https://css.ethz.ch/en/publications/cad/newsletter-service-cad.html>

Forced Migration and Displacement: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in the South Caucasus

Andreas Heinrich (Research Centre for East European Studies and Collaborative Research Center 1342 ‘Global Dynamics of Social Policy’ at the University of Bremen)

Globally, the number of forcibly displaced persons has sharply increased in the last years, with violent conflicts and wars in the Middle East, Sudan, and Ukraine, to name only a few. According to statistics of the UNHCR (formally known as the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees), their total number has risen steadily from 38.5 million in 2011 to 117.3 million at the end of 2023.¹

In line with the approach taken by the UNHCR, the term ‘forcibly displaced persons’ includes in this special issue only persons whose displacement has been caused by conflict, violence in the form of serious public disorder, or persecution, while excluding those whose displacement was caused by natural or human-made disasters.²

Forcibly displaced persons can be subdivided into the categories ‘refugees’ and ‘internally displaced persons’ (IDPs). While refugees have been forced to flee their homes or places of habitual residence and have crossed an international border to seek safety in another country, those who remain displaced within the territory of their home country are considered IDPs.³ While international law regulates the status not only of refugees themselves,⁴ but also of their children and further descendants, who are also considered refugees—even though they might not have themselves been displaced⁵—the legal rights of IDPs are entirely dependent on their respective national governments (Fielden 2008: 3).

While in 2023 nearly 1.1 million refugees from 39 countries decided to return home, 5.1 million IDPs returned to their place of origin. However, most returns may not be sustainable due to, for example, continuing unstable security conditions.⁶

Protracted Displacement in the South Caucasus

Since the end of the Second World War, protracted armed conflicts and the insecurity resulting from them have led to protracted displacement for millions of people the world over. In Europe, the South Caucasus—comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—has been the region (beside former Yugoslavia and Ukraine) most affected by the problems of forced migration and protracted displacement, ethnic conflicts and wars having plagued the region since the late Soviet era (see De Waal 2010, 2013).

Thus, the South Caucasus has had to deal with the protracted problem of displacement since the late 1980s. It is difficult to give precise figures and statistics of forcibly displaced people because these have often been politically instrumentalised, and are thus often disputed. However, conservative estimates assume that, between 1988 and 1994, a total of around 1.4 million people were displaced in the South Caucasus out of an official population of around 16 million (De Waal 2010: 100; see also de Waal 2013: 327–328). This huge number of refugees and IDPs, which after three decades still represents the majority of displaced persons in the region, has tested the resolve of the affected countries ever since.

In addition, the renewed armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2023 triggered the exodus of more than 115,000 ethnic Armenians from Nagorny-Karabakh, who sought refuge in Armenia (UNHCR 2024). The new escalation also resulted in an incremental return of Azerbaijani IDPs to their former homes; however, their numbers are very small at the moment and will not solve the region’s problems with protracted displacement anytime soon.

New Developments

The articles of this special issue cover the most recent flows of forced migration and the resettlement/return of IDPs in Armenia and Azerbaijan, respectively, as well as the stagnant situation in Georgia.

1 See <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/figures-glance> (Accessed: 10 July 2024).

2 See <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/methodology/definition/> (Accessed: 10 July 2024).

3 See <https://www.unhcr.org/refugees> and <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/methodology/definition/> (Accessed: 10 July 2024).

4 Who qualifies as a refugee is defined in Article 1 of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Regional legal instruments in Africa and the Americas have since broadened this definition by including people who are compelled to leave their country because of external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, internal conflicts, and massive violation of human rights or events seriously disturbing public order (<https://www.unhcr.org/refugees>, accessed: 10 July 2024).

5 See <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/refugees> (Accessed: 10 July 2024).

6 See <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/refugees> and <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends> (Accessed: 10 July 2024).

Nadja Douglas and Ivaylo Dinev focus on ‘The Political and Cultural Future of Karabakh Armenians’ after their mass exodus—mostly to Armenia—following the Azerbaijani military offensive in September 2023. Their contribution first examines the current situation of the displaced people with regard to their integration into mainstream Armenian society. In the second part, they shed light on political views, perceptions of the conflict and personal experiences of Karabakh Armenians by using unique survey data from Nagorny-Karabakh in order to delineate prior patterns and self-positioning. Moreover, they compare respondents’ views per socio-demographic factors and lived experience.

Over the past three decades, Azerbaijan has hosted a large number of IDPs. Fleeing their homes in the early 1990s, they have experienced protracted displacement and a prolonged period of precariousness. In ‘Protracted Displacement, Social Protection, and Return of IDP Communities in Azerbaijan’, Farid Guliyev analyses the government’s implementation of its ‘Great Return’ resettlement programme for IDPs. After the recovery of lost territories in 2020, Azerbaijan now aims to resettle IDPs (and their children) to their former places of residence. Based on interviews of IDPs, experts, and officials, the article examines the complex dynamics of protracted displacement of IDPs and highlights some of the issues the government needs to address during the resettlement of a large number of displaced persons.

Like Azerbaijan, Georgia has been facing severe problems of internal displacement for over three decades. Tatia Chikhladze’s article ‘In Search of Home: Evaluating Georgia’s IDP Integration Strategy’ examines the integration of Georgian IDPs into local society. Besides exploring official efforts and the legal framework for integration, the author scrutinises through in-depth interviews how IDPs themselves assess the effectiveness of these efforts in practice.

About the Special Editor

Andreas Heinrich is a postdoctoral researcher at the Research Centre for East European Studies and the Collaborative Research Centre 1342/University of Bremen, Germany. He works primarily on internal displacement and social welfare policy in the former Soviet Union.

Acknowledgement

This special issue is in part a product of research conducted within the Collaborative Research Center 1342 ‘Global Dynamics of Social Policy’ at the University of Bremen. The Center is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation)—Project Number 374666841—SFB 1342.

The research on IDPs in Georgia and Azerbaijan has benefited from technical support by the CRC’s infrastructure team. The technical solution for the collection of online documents (web scrapping) and processing in a database, as well as further analysis options, were developed by a student project in the master’s programme ‘Digital Media’ at FB3 (Mathematics/Computer Science) at the University of Bremen in the academic year 2022/23. The student project is part of the INF project within CRC 1342 aiming to support research-based learning, and was supervised by Gabriela Molina Leon and Andreas Breiter. The resulting database comprises 3,082 documents for Georgia and 1,784 documents for Azerbaijan.

References

- De Waal, Thomas (2010) *The Caucasus: An introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- De Waal, Thomas (2013) *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through peace and war*. 10th-year anniversary edition, revised and updated. New York: New York University Press.
- Fielden, Alexandra (2008) *Ignored Displaced Persons: The plight of IDPs in urban areas*. Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (New Issues in Refugee Research, Research Paper No. 161).
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2024) *Cash Assistance Factsheet – Armenia, July*, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/110128> (Accessed: 21 October 2024).

The Political and Cultural Future of Karabakh Armenians

Ivaylo Dinev, Nadja Douglas (both Centre for East European and International Studies, ZOiS)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000712914

Abstract

The Azerbaijani military offensive in September 2023 with the aim of reintegrating the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh led to a mass exodus of almost the entire de facto state's population of ethnic Armenians. Today, at least one in every 30 people living in Armenia is a refugee from Nagorno-Karabakh. There are many practical issues involved in integrating them into Armenian society. But what has happened to their political and cultural destiny since they were uprooted from their native land, and what will happen in the future? In our paper, we first examine the current situation of the displaced people with regard to their integration into Armenian society. We then in the second part of the contribution shed light on the political views, perceptions of the conflict, and personal experiences of Karabakh Armenians. We rely on unique survey data from Nagorno-Karabakh, with two waves in 2011 (N = 800) and 2020 (N = 820), in order to delineate prior patterns and self-positioning. Moreover, we compare respondents' views per socio-demographic factors and lived experience. Based on the findings, we draw conclusions on prospects for integration and, more broadly, for the cultural and political future of Karabakh Armenians.

Introduction: Current Situation of Displaced Karabakh Armenians and Their Integration into Armenian Society

The Azerbaijani military offensive in September 2023 led to the reintegration of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh into Azerbaijan and a mass exodus of almost the entire population of Karabakh Armenians. While some of them have since moved on to Russia or Europe, most (at least at first) tried to start a new life in the Republic of Armenia. Today, at least one in every 30 people living in Armenia is a refugee from Nagorno-Karabakh (Vartanyan 2024).

The Armenian government has assumed responsibility for many of the practicalities of integrating this large influx of people into Armenian society. Moreover, there is a huge social, integrational and educational role that has been taken on by local non-governmental organisations, which receive funds from international partners. The initial empathy in Armenian society was huge, and the government support considered generous. However, the government aid programmes have strained the state budget, and it is not clear how long this support can be maintained. Lump-sum payments as well as monthly allowances of up to US\$125 (less than the minimum wage in Armenia) to every adult refugee were meant to cover living expenses and the most basic needs (Martirosyan 2023). The refugees were distributed to towns and rural areas throughout the country to avoid the creation of huge refugee camps (Vartanyan 2024); however, over half of the refugees ultimately ended up in Yerevan in hopes of finding work there more easily.

For now, the government has announced a one-time extension of the aid programmes until the end of 2024. The initial solidarity of the Armenian population seems to be slowly subsiding, and it is expected that social frictions and resentments in the country will mount. Out of a population of three million people in Armenia, 24.8% were already living below the poverty line before the arrival of Karabakh-Armenians (Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia 2023). While international aid sent from the European Union (European Commission 2024), UN agencies, and the International Committee of the Red Cross as well as individual countries and from Armenian diaspora communities around the world provide short-term relief, they do not constitute a long-term solution to the problem.

The main focus of the government's aid programme is on providing housing. However, despite having launched a housing plan,¹ the government has so far failed to issue a comprehensive employment integration plan (Martirosyan 2023). Employment of refugees poses a significant challenge, as only a small percentage of the displaced have so far found registered work (Grigoryan 2024a). The costs for professional training, as well as subsidies to companies offering Karabakh Armenians work contracts of at least six months, are covered by the government (Grigoryan 2024a).

But besides the question of material support, what are the consequences for the Karabakh Armenians' political and cultural identity since they were uprooted from their native land? This topic has so far mostly flown under the radar of international observers, most of the

¹ 'Government approves housing provision program for Nagorno-Karabakh displaced people', *Armenpress*, 16 May 2024, <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1137191> (Accessed: 10 October 2024).

focus being on the group's integration into mainstream Armenian society. This contribution sheds light on the fate of Karabakh-Armenian identities, the views and preferences of Karabakh Armenians prior to the violent dissolution of the de facto state, and prospects for their political and cultural integration in Armenia.

Cultural Heritage, Citizenship and Political Identity

The aspect of the preservation of Armenian cultural and historical heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh is currently debated and documented, primarily in terms of monitoring of cultural sites on Karabakh territory (Caucasus Heritage Watch 2023; Maghakyan 2023); however, the political (in terms of representation) and cultural (in terms of preservation of cultural belonging and beliefs) identities of the Karabakh Armenian community outside their homeland have attracted far less attention.

According to data from the National Security Service of the Republic of Armenia, as of May 2024, 17,269 refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh had arrived in and then left Armenia, of which 7,138 had since returned to the country (Badalian 2024). This happened despite Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's assurances that the government would do everything in its power to ensure that the Armenian population of Karabakh remain in Armenia. The former bureau of the Human Rights Commissioner of Nagorno-Karabakh declared in April 2024 that more than 30% of the displaced are considering emigrating to third states (Grigoryan 2024b).

Following the displacement of Karabakh Armenians from their native lands to Armenia, it became clear that they would not be automatically recognised as citizens of the Republic of Armenia. Their new Armenian passports were officially issued solely for travel purposes; they do not entitle the holders to other rights, such as the right to vote or employment in state institutions (Grigoryan 2024a). Legally, displaced Karabakh Armenians have been granted by the government a status as 'people under temporary protection', which allows them to be recognised as refugees not only by the Armenian government, but also under international law, thus giving them the possibility to also apply for international refugee documents.

In principle, all Karabakh Armenians have the right to apply for Armenian citizenship. However, according to the Armenian Ministry of Interior, of the 79,000 displaced Karabakh Armenians who had completed the registration process by March 2024, only 1,437 had applied for citizenship (Grigoryan 2024b). Many do not fully understand the implications of obtaining

Armenian citizenship and are afraid of not being able to return to their homeland in the future. According to a lawyer from Nagorno-Karabakh, especially males have refrained from applying for citizenship in order to avoid the obligatory Armenian military service. Furthermore, keeping their refugee status gives them the opportunity under the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (of which Armenia is a member) to potentially settle in another country in the future (Grigoryan 2024a).

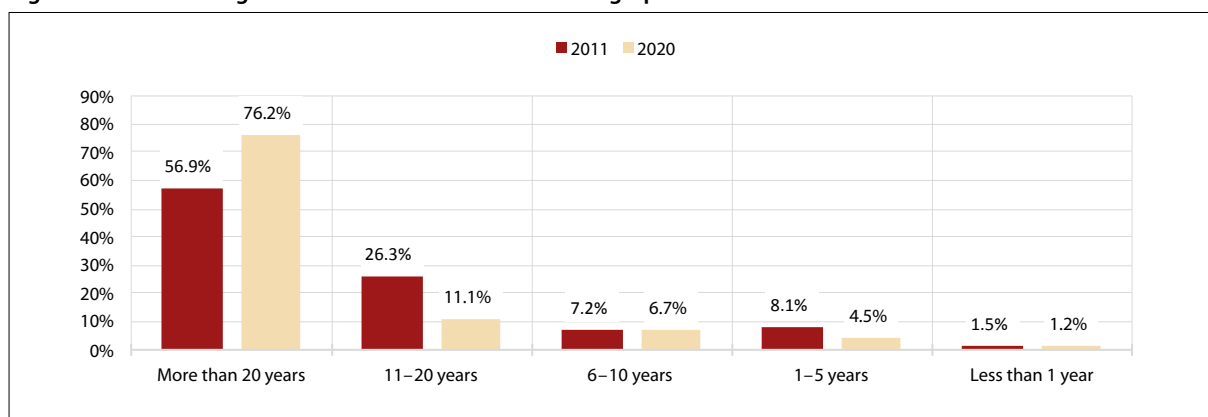
With regard to the political representation of Karabakh Armenians, the former political elites of Nagorno-Karabakh have attempted to create a government-in-exile headquartered in Yerevan. On 28 September 2023, the government of the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh (the Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh), under military pressure from Azerbaijan, ordered the dissolution of all its state institutions and organisations until 1 January 2024. Several Karabakh politicians were imprisoned by Azerbaijan as they attempted to flee, among them Ruben Vardanyan, former State Minister of Artsakh (equivalent to a prime minister since Artsakh voted in 2017 to adopt a presidential system of governance). The Karabakh leader and former de facto president Samuel Sharakhmanyany subsequently declared the dissolution in December to be invalid.²

The quest for a continued separate political identity by the Karabakh leadership has become a thorn in the side for the Pashinyan government, which has forcefully repudiated its proposal. The speaker of the Armenian Parliament Alen Simonyan stated that there cannot exist a Karabakh state within Armenia and that Armenia will not provide money to maintain the political institutions of Karabakh (Vanyan 2024a). Even the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Artsakh was not permitted to be re-registered in the Republic of Armenia as an official institution. To the Karabakh Armenian community, it thus seems as if authorities and elites in Yerevan are not interested in preserving any element of 'statehood' of 'Artsakh', rather viewing them as a threat to Armenian national security (Vanyan 2024a). The dissatisfaction of Karabakh Armenians with the authorities in Armenia on a political level is noticeable, in particular on social media (Grigoryan 2024b).

Self-Positioning and Identification of Karabakh Armenians

In order to understand the Karabakh Armenians' current situation and national and cultural identities better, it makes sense to look to the past. We will make use of unique survey data from Nagorno-Karabakh in order

2 'Die Kehrtwende der Separatisten von Bergkarabach', Deutschlandfunk, 27 December 2023, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/bergkarabach-aserbajdschan-armenien-konflikt-100.html> (Accessed: 10 October 2024).

Figure 1: 'How Long Have You Lived in This House/Geographical Area?'

Note: 2011 survey question: 'Since what year have you been living in your current house/flat?'; 2020 survey question: 'For how long has your family lived in this geographical area?'

Source: Surveys among Karabakh Armenians in 2011 (N = 800) and 2020 (N = 820).

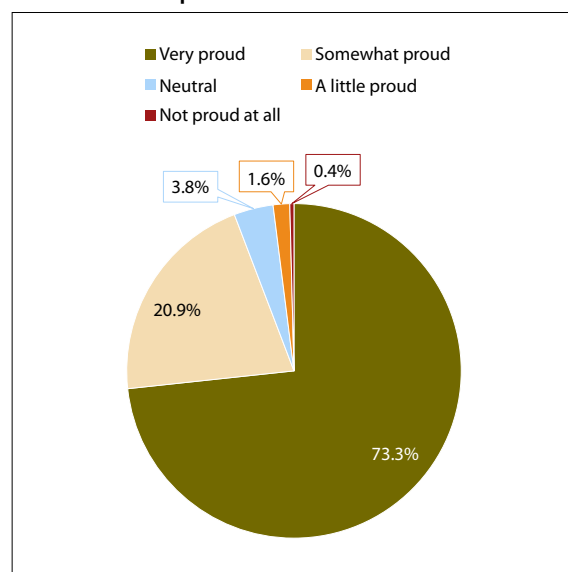
to delineate the evolution of identification patterns and draw conclusions for the future of Karabakh Armenians. The representative surveys were conducted in two waves by the Sociological Research Centre at the Armenian Academy of Sciences in late 2011 with 800 respondents (Toal/ O'Loughlin 2013) and in February 2020—about seven months before the war—by the Caucasus Research Resource Centre with 820 respondents (O'Loughlin/ Bakke 2021). The surveys were conducted via face-to-face interviews. The sampling design was based on stratification by urban/rural residence, random selection of primary sampling units, random selection of respondents in these units, and follow-up controls by supervisors (O'Loughlin/ Bakke 2021).

Looking Back: Prior Identification Patterns

The surveys indicated strong ethnic, linguistic, and religious homogeneity among Karabakh Armenians, with practically everyone identifying as Armenian. Regarding paternal and maternal ethnicity, similarly all reported to be Armenian (100% and 99.5%, respectively). When asked about the language spoken at home or native language, a majority reported use of the Armenian language, with only small numbers reporting primary use of other languages, such as Russian. Within the self-identification questions, however, we observed a distinct regional identity: a vast majority (85.1%) reported their identity as being Karabakhi (self-designation of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh), while only 11.9% identified themselves as Hayastani (self-designation of Armenians in the Republic of Armenia). A small number of respondents also identified themselves as Soviets (1.9% in the 2011 survey). The large part of the sample was born in Nagorno-Karabakh (80.1% in 2011 and 83.2% in 2020) and Armenia (7.5% in 2011 and 11.8% in 2020), with small number of respondents being born in Azerbaijan

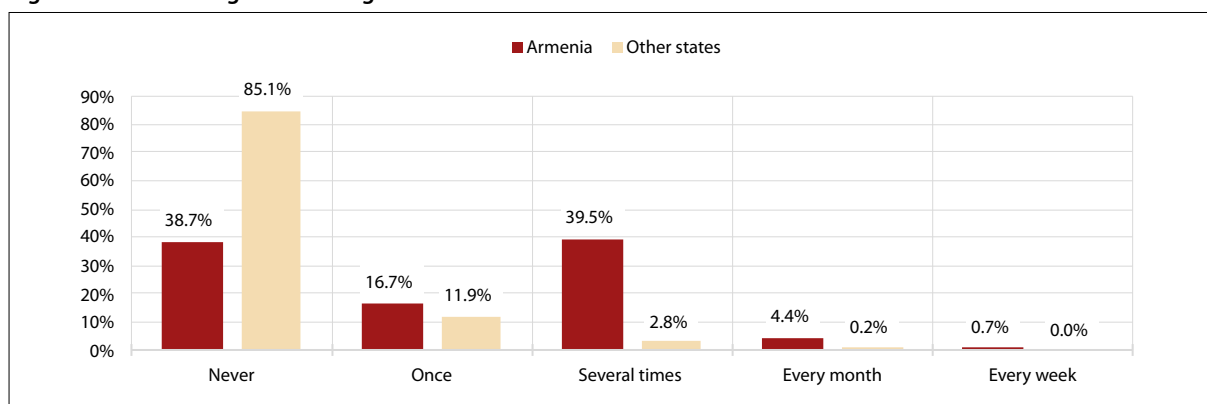
(2% in 2011 and 3.8% in 2020). Due to the conflict and the fact that a majority of respondents in both cohorts had lived in the same place for more than 20 years (see Figure 1), Karabakh Armenians developed a strong local identity linked to their historical resilience and connection to the de facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The survey also revealed a high level of pride in their ethnic group (see Figure 2) and its historical past, indicating a strong group identity. Overall, 94% of respondents said they were 'proud' or 'very proud' of their ethnic group, while only 6% responded that they were 'neutral' or 'not proud'.

Figure 2: 'To What Extent Do You Feel Proud to Be a Member of Your Ethnic Group, Your People?'

Source: Survey among Karabakh Armenians in 2020 (N = 817).

Figure 3: Travelling Outside Nagorno-Karabakh



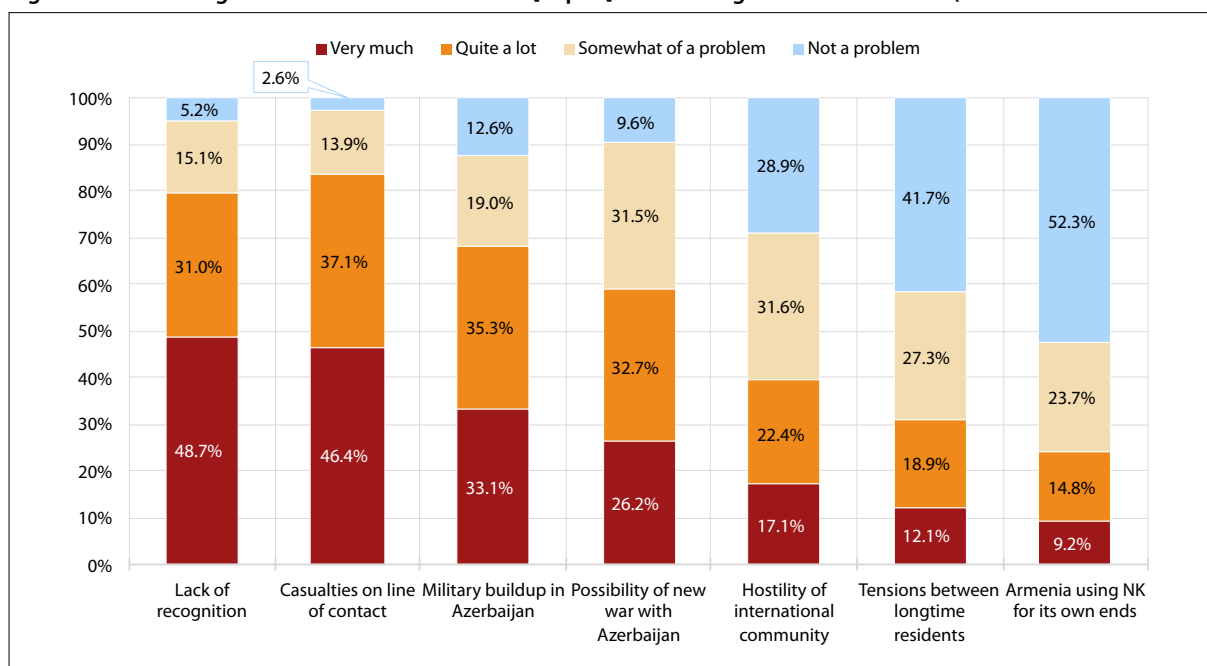
Source: Survey among Karabakh Armenians in 2020 (N = 817).

The unresolved territorial conflict had a negative effect on the respondents’ mobility and connections to other states in the past. The process of obtaining travel documents was cumbersome, and travelling in and out of the region was hampered by difficult logistics and socio-economic constraints. Only 5.4% reported having a family member who lived outside Armenia, 8.1% had an international passport, and slightly under 3% had travelled to countries other than Armenia more than once (see Figure 3). At the same time, a majority had relatives or friends in Armenia and Russia, at 64% and 68%, respectively; the figure for all other countries combined was only 10% (2020 survey wave).

Perceptions of the Conflict, Institutions, and International Relations

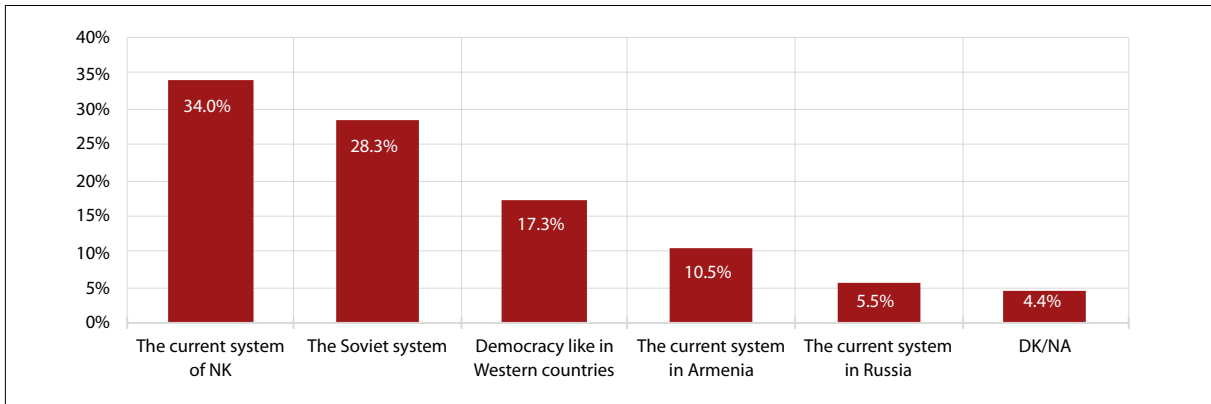
The impact of the conflict on people’s everyday lives was considerable. A significant number of respondents (70.6%) reported that either they themselves or a close family member had been victims of or witnessed violence resulting in injury or death as a result of the first Karabakh war in the early 1990s (2011 survey wave). The conflict and the disputed territories also affected the emotional state of Karabakh Armenians: when asked about the biggest problems faced by the region in 2011, most respondents opted for items related to the conflict, such as ‘Lack of recognition’ (48.7%) or ‘Casualties on

Figure 4: ‘How Big of a Problem Is Each of These [Topics] Now for Nagorno-Karabakh ...?’ (One Answer in Each Row)



Note: NK = Nagorno-Karabakh.

Source: Survey among Karabakh Armenians in 2020 (N = 770 to 794).

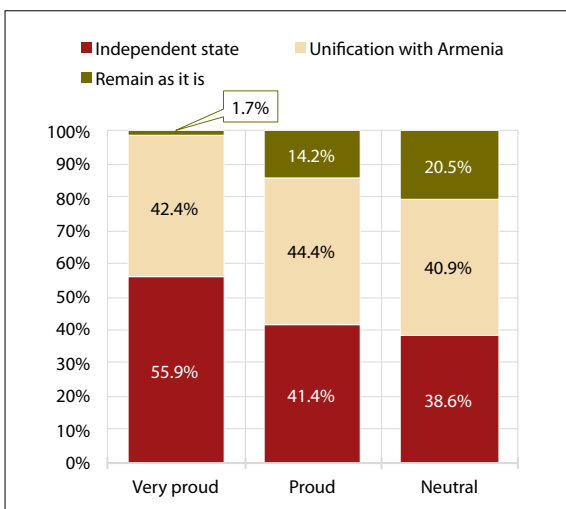
Figure 5: 'What Political System Seems Best to You?'

Note: NK = Nagorno-Karabakh. DK = Don't know, NA = no answer.

Source: Survey among Karabakh Armenians in 2011 (N = 764).

line of contact' (46.4%). Figure 4 on p. 7 summarises the estimation by the respondents in 2011. In 2020, still about 53% reported items related to the conflict, such as 'Lack of peace' (33.8%) and 'Unsolved territorial conflict' (14.4%).

Regarding their political views (see Figure 5), residents of Nagorno-Karabakh were divided. The 2011 survey wave revealed strong preferences for the de facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as the Soviet political system. Only 17% and 10%, respectively, classified Western democracies and Armenia as appropriate systems. The current political system in Russia was quite unpopular, mentioned by only around 5% of respondents. Furthermore, Karabakh Armenians were divided on the question of whether they wanted independence or unification with Armenia.

Figure 6: Link between Levels of National Pride and One's Outlook on the Future of Nagorno-Karabakh

Source: Survey among Karabakh Armenians in 2011 (N = 782).

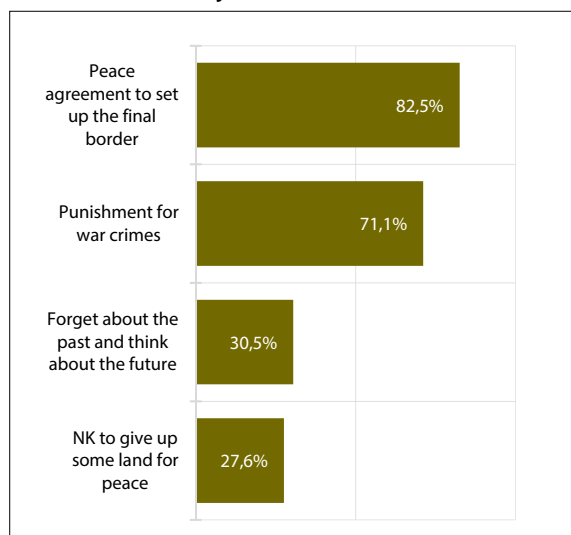
In this regard, there was a clear correlation in the 2011 survey wave between support for an independent state and high levels of national pride, often rooted in a sense of victimhood: see Figure 6.

The question in the 2011 survey wave regarding the relations between the two parties to the conflict, Armenia and Azerbaijan, reveals how strongly the military conflict had impacted perspectives in Karabakh. On the one hand, an overwhelming majority believed that the decision on borders was linked to the signing of a peace agreement and that the issue of private properties should be decided by an international commission. On the other hand, a large majority of respondents also insisted on punishing war criminals and not allowing Azerbaijanis to return to Nagorno-Karabakh (Figures 7 and 8 on p. 9). Also remarkable is the fact that 42.5% of the respondents endorsed the idea that Nagorno-Karabakh authorities should take care of Muslim graveyards and mosques on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh; this shows a deep respect for cultural sites, even if they belong to Azerbaijani neighbours that are perceived to be hostile. Nearly 27%, after all, supported the idea that Azerbaijanis should be granted the right to visit their family graves in Nagorno-Karabakh. The mutual access to cultural sites and graveyards, as well as the thereby evinced respect for the corresponding cultural heritage, have been raised in the context of confidence-building efforts since Azerbaijan's forceful reintegration of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023.

Comparing Views on the Basis of Socio-Demographic Factors

When we look at how different generations viewed the future of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2011, a nuanced picture comes into view. For example, the younger generations expressed a more pronounced desire for Nagorno-Karabakh independence, while a slight majority within older

Figure 7: Agreement with Statements [Below] About Relations Between Armenians and Azerbaijanis



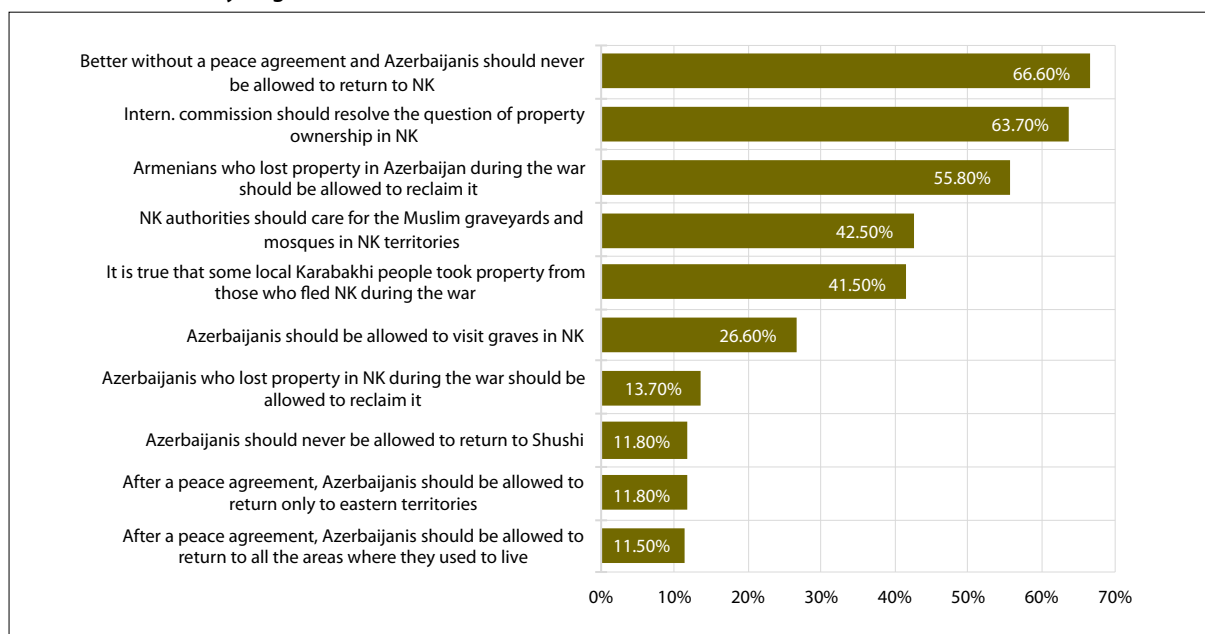
Note: NK = Nagorno-Karabakh. The variables include four ordered options from 1 ('Strongly disagree') to 4 ('Strongly agree'). The graph displays the combined proportion of 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree'.

Source: Survey among Karabakh Armenians in 2011 (N = 784 to 792).

Source: Surveys among Karabakh Armenians in 2011 (N = 800) and 2020 (N = 820).

generations believed that the future would have lain in a unification with the Republic of Armenia. Middle-aged people, displayed a balance between the two options.

Figure 8: Agreement with the Following Statements Regarding the Azerbaijanis Who Used to Live in Areas Controlled by Nagorno-Karabakh De Facto Authorities

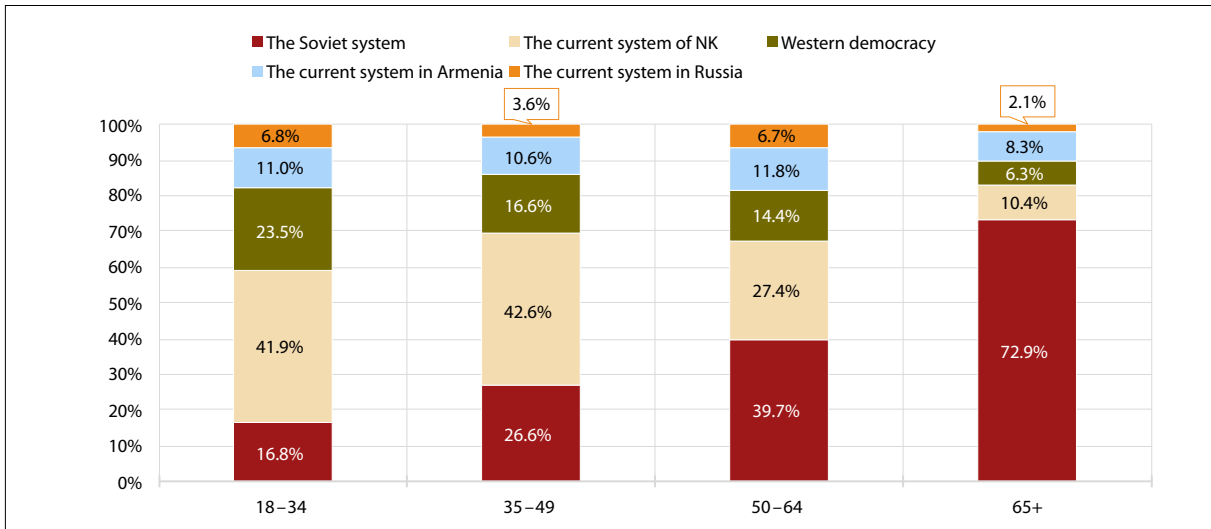


Note: NK = Nagorno-Karabakh.

Source: Survey among Karabakh Armenians in 2011 (N = 756 to 793).

Concerning the 2011 survey wave question about the most important problems faced by the region, there was an equally strong presence of the 'unresolved conflict' answer in all age categories. However, the most visible differences across socio-demographic and past experience variables were observed in terms of views on various political systems (Figure 9 on p. 10). Respondents with longer lived experience of the previous political regime, those over 65, overwhelmingly supported the former Soviet system (72.9%), while its popularity declined with each successive generation. The most popular political systems among the young (18–34) and middle-aged (35–49) categories were the political system of the Nagorno-Karabakh political entity (41.9% and 42.6%, respectively) and Western democracy (23.5% and 16.6%, respectively). Less popular was the current system of Russia, chosen by only 6.8% (aged 18–34) to 1.8% (over 65) of the respondents. Higher support for the communist system of the former Soviet Union, but also the de facto state's political system, and less support for the other options, showed respondents who had either themselves been victims or had family members who had been victims of the war (Figure 10 on p. 10). This could be an indicator of limited flexibility on the part of the elder generations in terms of adapting to the new circumstances. A population with significant traumatic memories is most likely going to remain preoccupied with itself for some time, and less open to new approaches.

Figure 9: Preferred Political System by Generational Cohort



Note: NK = Nagorno-Karabakh.

Source: Survey among Karabakh Armenians in 2011 (N = 764).

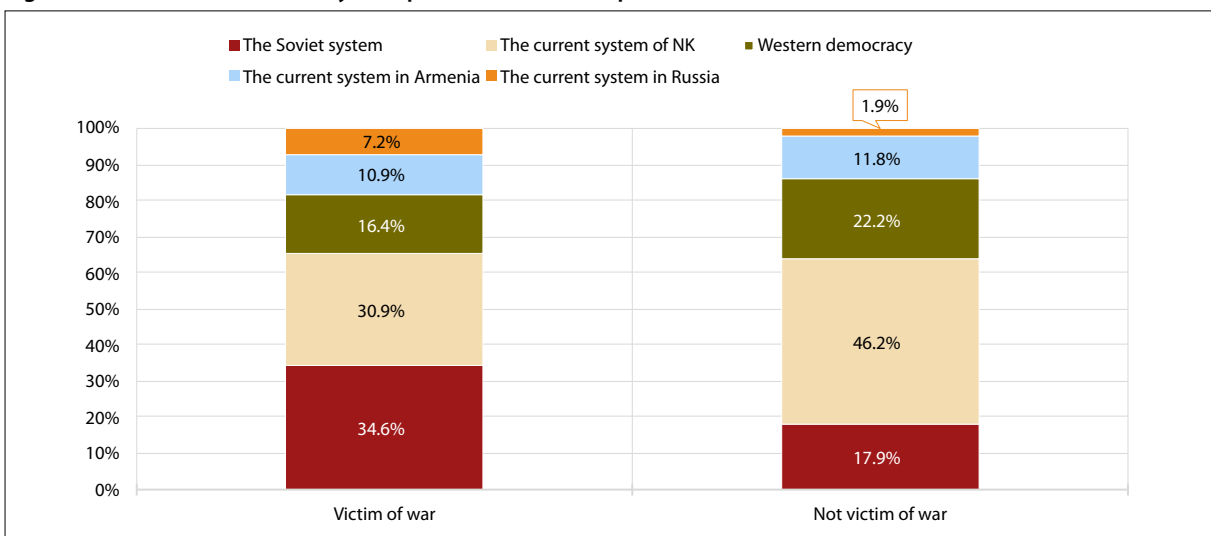
Conclusion: Prospects for the Cultural and Political Future of Karabakh Armenians

At present, the problem of the Karabakh Armenians has been discussed as a humanitarian issue and has almost vanished from the focus of the international community. Nevertheless, Karabakh Armenian representatives have asked the Armenian authorities to provide them with the possibility of creating a Karabakh-Armenian community life within Armenia in order to preserve their specific culture and traditions, referring e.g. to their regional dialect, customs, historical narratives, etc. (Vanyan 2024b). The failure to take these

needs into account and the outright suppression of Karabakh Armenian political representation could damage the relationship between the Armenian majority society and the Karabakh-Armenian community. It would also impede the long-term integration of the latter.

The findings from the 2011 and 2020 survey waves reveal the complex and sometimes ambivalent values and preferences of Karabakh Armenians prior to the violent dissolution of the de facto state. While nearly all respondents identified as belonging to the Armenian people, sharing Armenian national identity, language, and religion, about 85% also expressed a dis-

Figure 10: Preferred Political System per Different War Experiences (2011)



Note: NK = Nagorno-Karabakh.

Source: Survey among Karabakh Armenians in 2011 (N = 755).

tinct regional Karabakh identity. Prior to the second war, about 51% of the respondents believed that an independent state of Nagorno-Karabakh was a possible solution to the conflict (2011), whereas 41% favoured unification with Armenia, reflecting divided hopes for the de facto state's future. Regarding their political orientation, Karabakh Armenians demonstrated diverse views, from supporting the de facto state's semi-presidential system (prior to 2017) to endorsing Western democracy, or even the communist Soviet system.

This blend of strong regional identity and varied political preferences on the part of Karabakh Armenians, shaped by the conflict and the fact that they had lived for a very long time in relative isolation, detached from the Armenian state, poses challenges to their integration into contemporary Armenian society. The strong bond to their homeland makes many Karabakh Armenians hesitant to apply for Armenian citizenship, fearing the risk of losing the ability to return to Nagorno-Karabakh and the property they left behind.³ Nevertheless, there is a risk that, over time, Karabakh Armenians may face challenges in preserving their regional, cultural, and political identities, and heritage. Young people may likely eventually come to terms with the idea of integrating into Armenian society. But for the majority, whose political views and personal fates have been

so closely bound to their home region, this remains the second-best solution. The vision of a prospective special status for their home region has been utterly destroyed by Azerbaijan's move to reintegrate the Karabakh territory by force in September 2023.

The UN International Court of Justice mandated that Azerbaijan guarantees the right of Armenian refugees to return to their homeland in Nagorno-Karabakh in November 2023 (Corder 2023). Many in the international community have verbally supported this. However, the major part of the Karabakh Armenian community on the ground has at present no hope or determination to return to the territory of Karabakh. They are currently preoccupied with settling and integrating into the Armenian host society; many are still trying to cope with post-traumatic stress and related health issues. The Azerbaijani position in this regard is ambivalent, claiming formally not to hinder any Karabakh Armenian intending to remain on or return to the territory of Karabakh, as long as they would accept becoming an Azerbaijani citizen and respect Azerbaijan's constitution and laws. On the other hand, the rhetoric of President Ilham Aliyev, of other Azerbaijani officials, and within Azerbaijani society more broadly remains extremely hostile towards the former Armenian inhabitants of the Karabakh territory.

Acknowledgement

The authors thank Dr Harutyun Harutyunyan for his constructive comments on a draft version of this contribution.

The survey cited in the text was conducted by the Sociological Research Centre at the Armenian Academy of Sciences in Yerevan under the supervision of Professor Gevork Pogonian (first wave in 2011, with 800 respondents) and the Caucasus Research Resource Centre Yerevan (second wave in 2020, with 820 respondents). Both surveys were conceived of and guided by a multinational team of researchers. Data collection was partially funded by US National Science Foundation Grant Number 1759645 (with John O'Loughlin as Principal Investigator). We are thankful to Sabine von Löwis (ZOiS) and the group for making the data available to us and granting us the permission to use it in our article.

About the Authors

Ivaylo Dinev is a political scientist and postdoctoral researcher at ZOiS (The Centre for East European and International Studies, Berlin), where he coordinates the Multi-Method Data Laboratory of the KonKoop Research Network, funded by the Federal Ministry of Research and Education (BMBF—FKZ 01UG2209A). He holds a doctoral degree in political science from the joint doctoral initiative of Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies and the Universities of Siena, Pisa, and Florence.

Nadja Douglas is a political scientist and researcher at ZOiS, currently coordinating the KonKoop thematic line 'In:Security in Eastern Europe'. She holds a master's degree in International Relations from Sciences Po Paris and a PhD from Humboldt University Berlin.

References

- Badalian, Naira (2024) How many forcibly displaced Artsakh residents have left Armenia? NSS data, *Arminfo*, 25 June, https://arminfo.info/full_news.php?id=84643&lang=3 (Accessed: 10 October 2024).

³ 'Karabakh Armenians reject Armenian citizenship: fears and expectations', JAM News, 21 October 2024, <https://jam-news.net/armenian-citizenship-fears-of-karabakh-armenians/> (Accessed: 13 November 2024)

- Caucasus Heritage Watch (2023) Monitoring Report, December 2023, <https://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/?p=1536> (Accessed: 10 October 2024).
- Corder, Mike (2023) Top UN court orders Azerbaijan to ensure the safety of Nagorno-Karabakh people, *Associate Press*, 17 November, <https://apnews.com/article/armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-icj-court-dc733253a3bbd4a19374fffd2ddcca74> (Accessed: 10 October 2024).
- European Commission (2024) EU increases humanitarian aid to displaced Karabakh Armenians with €5.5 million, 13 February, https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/news-stories/news/eu-increases-humanitarian-aid-displaced-karabakh-armenians-eu55-million-2024-02-13_en (Accessed: 10 October 2024).
- Grigoryan, Ani (2024a) Building a New Beginning: Struggles and Triumphs of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, *Caucasus Watch*, 10 March, <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/building-a-new-beginning-struggles-and-triumphs-of-armenians-from-nagorno-karabakh.html> (Accessed: 10 October 2024).
- Grigoryan, Alvard (2024b) Bezhentsy iz Nagornogo Karabakha raskritikovali programmu pomochshti v Armenii, *Kavkazskii Uzel*, 30 May, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/400461> (Accessed: 10 October 2024).
- Maghakyan, Simon (2023) Artsakh Heritage: What Is Happening to Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian Monuments, *EVN Report*, 27 November, Available at: <https://evnreport.com/politics/artsakh-heritage-what-is-happening-to-nagorno-karabakhs-armenian-monuments/> (Accessed: 10 October 2024).
- Martirosyan, Armine (2023) How Armenia solves the problems of the Karabakh people: are the government's projects effective?, *JAM News*, 23 December, <https://jam-news.net/assistance-to-nk-resettlers-with-peoples-stories/> (Accessed: 10 October 2024).
- O'Loughlin, J./ Bakke, K. (2021) Territorial Ambitions in Nagorno-Karabakh: Survey Results Before the 2020 War, *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 121, 15–18.
- Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia (2023) *Armenia – poverty snapshot over 2019-2022*. Available at: https://armstat.am/file/article/poverty_2023_en_2.pdf, (Accessed: 10 October 2024).
- Toal, Gerard/ O'Loughlin, John (2013) Land for Peace in Nagorny Karabakh? Political Geographies and Public Attitudes Inside a Contested de facto State, *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 1(2): 158–182.
- Vanyan, Marut (2024a) The Daily Struggles of Karabakh Armenians in Their New Home, *Caucasus Watch*, 29 February, <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/the-daily-struggles-of-karabakh-armenians-in-their-new-home.html> (Accessed: 10 October 2024).
- Vanyan, Marut (2024b) Abandoned to Their Fate: The Dim Future of Karabakh Armenians, *Caucasus Watch*, 30 April, <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/abandoned-to-their-fate-the-dim-future-of-karabakh-armenians.html> (Accessed: 10 October 2024).
- Vartanyan, Olesya (2024) Armenia Struggles to Cope with Exodus from Nagorno-Karabakh, *International Crisis Group Commentary*, 4 March, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/armenian-azerbaijani-conflict-armenia/armenia-struggles-cope-exodus> (Accessed: 10 October 2024).

Durable Solutions and Return of IDPs in Azerbaijan

Farid Guliyev (American University in Dubai, UAE)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000712914

Abstract

The Azerbaijani government has consistently advocated for a ‘return’ to Karabakh as the only viable solution to the protracted displacement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country. In 2022, the government initiated the ‘Great Return’ programme, aiming to resettle 140,000 IDPs to their places of origin in Karabakh by the end of 2026. Drawing on data from two separate sets of semi-structured interviews conducted in different years—2011 and 2023—in Azerbaijan, this article explores interviewees’ viewpoints on the conditions of forced displacement and potential durable solutions. The findings suggest that while the desire to return proved a consistent theme in both 2011 and 2023, the context has shifted significantly—from a sense of hope and uncertainty in 2011 to cautious optimism coupled with practical concerns about resettlement in 2023.

Background

The 1988–1994 conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan led to the displacement of up to one million ethnic Azerbaijanis (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2023: 3). This included around 200,000 Azerbaijanis from Armenia, as well as several hundred thousand Azerbaijanis from the Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and seven adjacent districts that came under Armenian control in the early 1990s (US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants 2002). As of the end of 2023, 658,000 individuals were registered as internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Azerbaijan. Consequently, in 2023 IDPs constituted about 6.6% of the country’s total population, positioning Azerbaijan among the highest rates of refugees and IDPs on a per capita basis globally (IDMC 2023; see Figure 1 on p. 14 for the demographic composition of the IDP population).

Individuals displaced from Karabakh are classified as IDPs, meaning they were forced to flee within Azerbaijani borders, whereas ethnic Azerbaijanis who fled from Armenia were granted refugee status. National legislation enacted in 1998 extended social protection benefits already afforded to IDPs to refugees, while also granting them Azerbaijani citizenship (IOM 2023). IDPs are entitled to a range of state-funded social benefits such as monthly allowances, state-supported housing, and coverage of university tuition fees. Unlike refugee status, however, the government treats the IDP status as inherently temporary, viewing return to their places of origin as the sole viable long-term solution (World Bank 2011; Gureyeva-Aliyeva/ Huseynov 2011).

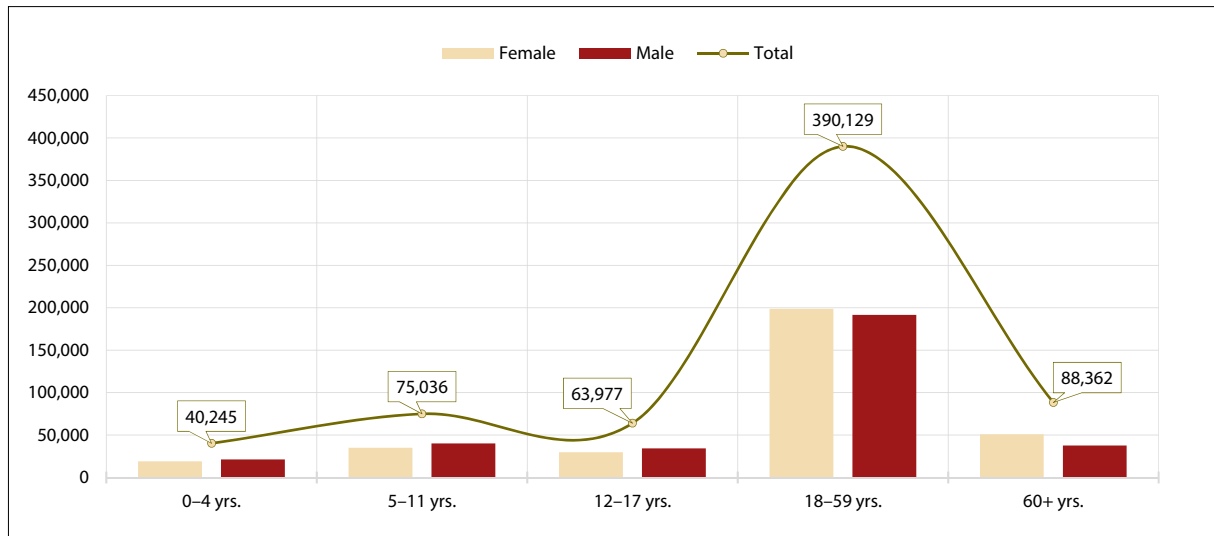
In the early 1990s, coupled with the state’s weak fiscal capacity, the influx of nearly one million IDPs

and refugees led to a humanitarian crisis in Azerbaijan, straining the country’s ability to address their needs. Initially, many displaced families were housed in temporary accommodations, such as public buildings, tent camps, abandoned railroad cars, schools and hostels. International organisations provided vital humanitarian aid that was instrumental in sustaining IDP livelihoods. Although the majority of displaced individuals originally came from rural areas, many subsequently relocated to urban centres, predominantly Baku and Sumgayit.

Beginning in the early 2000s, supported by increased oil revenues, the Azerbaijani government initiated a large-scale resettlement programme that improved living conditions for a large proportion of the country’s IDPs. By 2007, all makeshift tent camps had been dismantled, and 116 modern residential complexes (‘new settlements’) had been constructed. According to the State Committee on Refugees and IDPs, the main state institution responsible for overseeing IDP affairs, including granting IDP status and issuing relevant documentation, since 2007 more than 300,000 IDPs have been resettled to new apartments. Despite this, many IDPs continued to live in so-called ‘collective centres’, i.e., public buildings, such as dormitories and sanatoriums, where IDP families lived in individual rooms with shared communal spaces for cooking, bathing, and laundry (Wistrand 2023).

Addressing the needs of IDPs has been a key priority for the Azerbaijani government. Until today, authorities have allocated a total of 2.7 billion AZN (1.5 billion Euro) from the State Oil Fund (SOFAZ) to improve the living conditions of IDPs and refugees.¹ Poverty levels among the IDP population have reportedly fallen from 75% to 8% over the past 30 years, ‘highlighting the gov-

¹ See SOFAZ’s latest figures (as of 1 October 2024), available at: <https://www.oilfund.az/en/report-and-statistics/recent-figures> (Accessed: 9 October 2024).

Figure 1: Azerbaijani IDPs by Gender and Age, 2023

	0-4 yrs.	5-11 yrs.	12-17 yrs.	18-59 yrs.	60+ yrs.
Female	18,956	35,038	29,685	198,667	50,721
Male	21,289	39,998	34,292	191,462	37,641
Total	40,245	75,036	63,977	390,129	88,362

Note: As of the end of 2023, 658,000 persons were registered as IDPs in Azerbaijan. In terms of age distribution, adults aged 18–59 years are by far the largest group, comprising 59.3% of the total IDP population. Children aged 0–4 years make up 6.1%, while those aged 5–11 years account for 11.4%. Adolescents aged 12–17 years represent 9.7%, and seniors aged 60 and above constitute 13.4% of all IDPs.

Source: IDMC 2023, available at <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/azerbaijan/>

ernment's support for the displaced population through the allocation of food allowances and social benefits' (Interview with a high-ranking government official, personal communication, 23 May 2023).

The government has advocated the 'voluntary return' to Karabakh² as the only viable 'durable solution' for ending the protracted displacement of Azerbaijan's IDPs.³ Local integration and resettlement elsewhere in the country have not proven viable options for many displaced individuals, who often lack the financial means to pursue these alternatives independently (Wistrand 2023). Furthermore, for the government, the return of IDPs is viewed not only as a reversal of displacement and rehabilitation of affected communities, but also as a symbolic reaffirmation of Azerbaijan's sovereignty over the formerly occupied territories (Guliyev forthcoming). Central to this strategy is a large-scale resettlement and reconstruction programme. The government has consistently prioritized IDP resettlement, recognising that abandoning this goal would imply relinquishing any aspirations for the return of the lost territories. Therefore, the return of IDPs is seen not only as a humani-

tarian issue, but also as a key symbol of national identity and the restoration of territorial integrity.

This government approach is evident in the conditions associated with the government-funded housing programme for IDPs, who were resettled into 'new settlements' often located in insulated areas. The granting of these new settlement apartments came with specific restrictions attached; registered IDPs are not permitted to sell, gift, or transfer these apartments, which are classified as temporary shelters, with the government maintaining sole ownership (Abbasov/ Ibrahimova 2013). These apartments were allocated on a temporary, rent-free basis, indicating that the apartments and housing units remain under state custody (Interviews with experts and IDPs, personal communication, June 2023).

New settlements are purpose-built communities created for IDPs. They offer families their own homes, either houses or apartments, and are equipped with essential infrastructure, including schools, healthcare facilities, community centres, and access roads. Alongside separate schools for IDPs in new settlements, the establishment of insulated (and temporary) housing facil-

² For ease of reference, 'Karabakh' here and throughout the piece refers to all territories that came under Baku's control following the 2020 war and the military offensive in September 2023.

³ The term 'durable solution(s)' refers to the three well-known strategies to resolve displacement, namely, return, local integration, or resettlement (IASC 2010).

ities has contributed to the social isolation of some IDP communities, reflecting the government's preference for return over local integration as the favoured durable solution (Wistrand 2023). The official policy aims to maintain social cohesion within IDP communities by preventing assimilation with the non-IDP population, thereby maintaining the commitment to eventual return (Gureyeva-Aliyeva/ Huseynov 2011: 37).

At the same time, the government supports maintaining the institutional and administrative systems from the IDPs' places of origin. For example, IDPs who held civil service positions in local authorities have continued working in the same roles within the same (transplanted) village and regional structures, as if they were still living in those locations. Schools for IDP children have also been recreated with the same administrative systems and facilities as those in their villages of origin (World Bank 2011: 22).

In addition, a majority of Azerbaijan's IDPs continue to rely on government allowances as their main source of income. This currently includes a monthly food allowance of 33 AZN (18 Euro) for each family member, referred to as 'bread money', along with exemption from utility payments for those still living in collective centres. For IDPs living in apartments equipped with utility meters in the aforementioned new settlements, the food allowance is set at 60 AZN (approximately 33 Euro) per person. However, the state does not cover their utility expenses in this situation (Guliyev forthcoming).

The amount of social allowance has decreased over time, and social benefits have not kept pace with cost of living increases (Interviews with IDPs, personal communication, June 2023). All interviewed families receiving IDP allowances rank this support as one of their top four sources of monthly income, and nearly 90% of these households identified the allowances as one of their two most essential income sources, according to a recent survey (World Bank 2023). However, although a significant proportion of IDPs continue to rely on government assistance, over time, some have gradually achieved greater financial self-sufficiency. The government considers this assistance as 'complementary support', serving as a means 'to express sympathy for the plight of IDPs' (Interview with a high-ranking government official, personal communication, 23 May 2023), rather than as a tool to secure their livelihoods long-term.

IDP Resettlement Programme

As a result of the 2020 war and 2023 offensive, Azerbaijan regained control of virtually all internationally

recognised territories lost during the 1991–1994 war.⁴ In November–December 2022, the government launched the ambitious 'Great Return' programme ['Böyük Qayıdış' in Azerbaijani], outlining a plan to build 34,500 apartments and houses in the reclaimed territories with the goal of resettling 140,000 IDPs by 2026 (Mammadli 2023).⁵ The 2023 state budget allocated 5.26 billion AZN (2.95 billion Euro) for ongoing and new reconstruction projects in Karabakh. By 2030, a total of 30 billion AZN (16.8 billion Euro) is projected to be allocated for reconstruction and resettlement initiatives. As of September 2024, around 2,000 families, totalling around 8,000 former residents, have been resettled in Karabakh (Hajiyeva 2024), suggesting a slow pace of resettlement thus far.

Each returning family receives an apartment at no cost. Should they choose to accept this housing, they are expected to permanently reside there (Interview with an elderly IDP woman from Aghdam, personal communication, 10 May 2023). However, some of the settlements are being developed as so-called 'smart villages'. For instance, Aghali in the Zangilan District is the first settlement to be designed as a 'smart village', incorporating digital technologies and environmentally sustainable features. According to Mirza Aliyev, head of the agency in charge of the project, the Aghali Smart Village Project aims to create a digitally empowered smart community by integrating water, energy, and road systems into a smart cloud platform and offering high-speed broadband/fibre-optic internet access and connectivity, as well as redesigned waste management (Aliyev 2022). Other residences built in Zangilan and Fuzuli are designed as modern multi-storey apartment buildings. Given that many IDPs from the older generation have originated from rural backgrounds, these housing options do not always align with the rural livelihood preferences of the returnees (Kucera 2024).

Whether to integrate locally or to return has been a longstanding question in contexts of protracted displacement in Azerbaijan. While previous research has addressed this issue (e.g., Gureyeva-Aliyeva/ Huseynov 2011; Musayev et al. 2022; World Bank 2023), there needs to be a better understanding of perspectives on voluntary return vs. local integration. Across several surveys, a significant majority (up to 85%) of IDPs expressed a preference for returning to their places of origin (World Bank 2023: 36). However, a deeper examination of their motivations is necessary to better understand IDPs' viewpoints. For instance, 60% of those wish-

⁴ This escalation triggered the exodus of more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians from the former NKAO region, who sought refuge in Armenia. As of May 2024, 115,257 refugees had fled to Armenia, where they have been officially recognised as refugees and granted temporary protection status (UNHCR 2024).

⁵ Azərbaycan Respublikasının işğaldan azad edilmiş ərazilərinə Böyük Qayıdışa dair I Dövlət Proqramı [First State Programme on the Great Return to the liberated territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan], 16 November 2022, available at: <https://e-qanun.az/framework/52757>.

ing to return prefer relocating to a rural area, indicating a potentially significant shift from their current residences in urban environments. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a generational divide on the issue of return vs. local integration: younger IDPs—many of whom were born after their families were displaced—exhibit less interest in returning to their family’s region of origin compared to their older relatives (World Bank 2023: 37).

Methodology

This article is based on data gathered from two distinct sets of semi-structured interviews conducted in Azerbaijan. The first set was collected through focus groups and interviews in September and October 2011, led by Gureyeva-Aliyeva and Huseynov (2011), and focused on IDPs residing in dormitories and former hostels/ sanatoriums in Baku, as well as in frontline villages in the Aghdam and Tartar districts (for further details on the fieldwork locations and participant groups, see Table 1 on p. 19). The second set of interviews was conducted by the author between April and October 2023. These 15 interviews of experts, government officials, and IDPs were carried out in Baku and its suburbs (see Table 2 on p. 19 for an anonymised list of individuals interviewed in 2023).⁶ Interview transcripts were analysed to identify common themes surrounding the issue of return versus local integration. The aim of this study is to explore the views of respondents regarding the condition of protracted displacement and durable solutions to it.

This study has two main limitations. First, differences in sample size and participant composition between the two sets of interviews limit the comparability of the 2011 and 2023 data. While the first set focused exclusively on IDPs, the second data source included IDPs, experts, and government officials. This variation in participant type interviewed may have influenced the study’s findings. Second, as both sets of interviews used non-random sampling techniques, the perspectives gathered may not be representative or generalisable to the broader population of Azerbaijani IDPs.

Findings from the Interviews

From the interviews, several key themes emerged regarding durable solution options for IDP communities, categorised by the survey years 2011 and 2023.

Year 2011

In 2011, *uncertainty* and a sense of *living in limbo* emerged as prominent themes from interviews with IDPs (Gureyeva-Aliyeva/ Huseynov 2011). Interviewees expressed a lack of certainty in their lives, as they are continually told by the authorities they will be relocated. Many live in hope of either returning to their

homes or being moved to better housing conditions. They emphasise the challenge of sustaining hope for two decades and express a desire to live a decent life in their current location as well. As one IDP living in the outskirts of Baku remarked, ‘We are temporary residents here, which is why IDPs do not invest in their future in this area’ (Focus group interview with six IDP women from Khojaly, held in Pirshagy, September 2011).

This attitude is captured by the sentiments expressed by a group of IDP women from Khojaly living in a former Soviet-era summer sanatorium outside Baku: ‘We are living in a state of prolonged anticipation (‘the waiting mode’). We have not seen a home or any hope; we are confined to a dark room’. These women reported that they had faced significant challenges during their forced displacement and resettlement at a young age. ‘Since that time, we have been anticipating changes and a move to better living conditions. Currently, there are rumours that the residents of the sanatorium will be relocated to a newly constructed building in the Masazir district. However, no one consults us about our preferences for relocation or where we would like to live’ (Focus group interview with six IDP women from Khojaly, held in Pirshagy, September 2011).

Regarding the prospect of *eventual return*, elderly IDPs have expressed a deep longing to go back to their places of origin. In the words of another IDP: ‘If I were told that it is now possible to return to my village, I would be the first to relocate, even knowing I might encounter landmines’ (Interviews with IDPs from Kalbajar resettled in a dormitory in Ganja, October 2011). However, they also express concerns about their children’s adjustment. They noted, for instance, that the younger generation, having grown up in Baku, may prefer to remain there. Thus, the preference for return reveals a division between the older and younger generations of IDPs.

Year 2023

Twelve years later, in a new context following the government’s recovery of the territories and the initiation of return efforts, narratives have begun to shift. Overall, there is a perception that the government’s post-war return efforts are advancing slowly, compounded by legitimate concerns such as landmine hazards and infrastructure challenges. Unexploded ordnance and landmines remain a serious danger for communities in parts of Azerbaijan, which, following years of conflict, is now among the most heavily mined countries in the region. Since November 2020, explosive remnants of the war and landmines have resulted in 65 deaths and 289 injuries in the mine-contaminated areas of Azerbaijan (UNICEF 2024).

⁶ Informed consent was secured from all interviewed individuals, and anonymity has been guaranteed for all respondents.

The *desire to return* is strong but contingent on critical factors such as safety, housing options, and job opportunities. As one female IDP said, ‘If a house were offered to me today, I would go immediately’ (Interview with an elderly IDP woman from Aghdam, personal communication, 10 May 2023). This desire to return among older generations is often linked to their *emotional attachment* to the land. Some IDPs have a vivid mental image of their former homes, which no longer exist after entire towns and villages were completely destroyed (Effendi 2021). As everything is being rebuilt, there is nothing to anchor them to their original homes. As one IDP from Fuzuli said:

(Question: Would you consider returning to your former home [in Fuzuli]?)

Respondent: ‘Of course. My parents and I would like to return. However, my parents’ house was completely destroyed. They would prefer their house to be rebuilt in its original location. They want the land to be demined and returned to the original owners, rather than receiving ready-made houses from the government. This land holds their memories from before the war; it was the home of their ancestors. It is also tied to a sense of possession and ownership’ (Interview with Project Manager, himself an IDP from Fuzuli District, personal communication, May 2023).

The provision of housing on a temporary basis has led IDP communities to seek *greater certainty* regarding their place of residence. The possibility of returning to the recovered territories is tied to the provision of *housing and employment opportunities*, as well as safety concerns related to landmine contamination and proximity to the border with Armenia. Without significant improvements in infrastructure and economic prospects, the incentive to relocate diminishes. The government’s ‘Great Return’ programme offers housing to returning IDPs, but many may be reluctant to relocate permanently, especially those with established lives in urban areas like Baku. As a young man from Lachin who lives in Baku noted:

‘The Great Return programme offers individuals ownership of a house. If they turn down the opportunity to resettle, the house is offered to someone else. If you do not occupy that house, you will not receive it. Our father’s apartment in Lachin was in a building that has since been demolished. They promised to provide us with a house, but only if we agree to move back and live there. The state also pledged to offer social welfare benefits. However, I do not believe those with permanent residence in Baku would relocate to Lachin permanently. Those who have returned tend to be individuals involved in agriculture, such as beekeepers and cattle farmers. Per-

sonally, I would not consider moving back because I have my job here in Baku’ (Interview with Project Coordinator, himself an IDP from Lachin District, personal communication, May 2023).

While the programme is seen as a positive step, there are concerns about its design, particularly its lack of attention to *local needs and preferences*. Many IDPs would prefer greater autonomy in rebuilding their homes over standardised, top-down solutions, such as those seen in the implementation of smart cities and smart villages. Some IDPs question the usefulness of this type of housing. Another independent analyst noted:

‘The government should provide clarity on land reform and land distribution for IDP returnees in rural areas. These returnees should be allocated plots of land and receive government support in establishing self-sufficient small agricultural businesses. The focus should be on small and medium enterprises operated by local returnees, rather than large business owners who exploit returnees as cheap labour for their extensive agricultural holdings or luxury hotels’ (Interview with an independent analyst, himself an IDP from Shusha, Upper Karabakh, September 2023).

The older generation also tends to prefer acquiring plots of land and a rural, village lifestyle. As a middle-aged female IDP who lives in the outskirts of Greater Baku said after visiting her former home settlement of Khojaly (Azerbaijani: Xocalı), to which she plans to return: ‘What the authorities are building is beautiful, but they are not letting us keep even one chicken. We didn’t live in Moscow, we lived in Xocalı, the village’ (as quoted in Kucera 2024).

Conclusion

The findings from the interviews with IDPs in Azerbaijan provide insights into a shifting narrative on how to end protracted displacement of IDP communities.

In 2011, older generations expressed a strong desire to return to their former homes despite acknowledging risks, such as landmines. There was a concern regarding the younger generation’s ability to adjust, as many had grown up in urban settings like Baku, potentially leading to a division in preferences between generations. There was a pervasive sense of uncertainty, as many felt they were living in a sort of limbo. IDPs expressed a lack of certainty regarding relocation and the future, which had led to a reluctance to invest in their current living situations. Many IDPs felt like temporary residents, impacting their willingness to plan for the future.

In 2022–2023, as the government began the repatriation to Karabakh, there was a sense of slow progress of resettlement efforts. It is understood that the government’s post-war return initiatives face challenges, including landmine hazards and insufficient infrastructure, which hinder the return process. As in 2011, the desire

to return remains strong, but is contingent on critical factors such as safety, housing, and employment opportunities. Emotional attachments to the land continue to motivate many IDPs. Without significant improvements in infrastructure and job opportunities, however, there are few other incentives for relocation. IDPs express a preference for land ownership rather than government-provided housing.

The design of Great Return programme has raised some questions, particularly regarding its insufficient attention to local needs and preferences. Many IDPs, especially those with established lives in Baku, are reluctant to permanently relocate. IDPs prefer greater auton-

omy in rebuilding their homes rather than standardised, top-down solutions like smart cities and villages.

While the desire to return remains a common thread in both 2011 and 2023, the context has shifted significantly from hope and uncertainty in 2011 to cautious optimism mixed with practical concerns in 2023. The generational divide regarding return preferences has become more pronounced, with younger IDPs prioritising current opportunities in urban settings over a return to ancestral lands. There is a growing recognition of the need for tailored solutions that account for the specific circumstances and aspirations of IDP communities, emphasising local autonomy and economic empowerment.

About the Author

Farid Guliyev is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International and Middle Eastern Studies at the American University in Dubai (AUD), Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express gratitude to Tabib Huseynov for sharing field notes and interview data from his 2011 study on IDPs in Azerbaijan, as well as to the interviewees who participated in a round of face-to-face interviews with the author in 2023. He is also grateful to reviewers of this journal for their helpful comments.

The empirical research on which this publication is based has been conducted by the author for the Collaborative Research Centre 1342 ‘Global Dynamics of Social Policy’ at the University of Bremen. The Centre is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation)—Project Number 374666841—SFB 1342.

References

- Abbasov, Shahin/ Ibrahimova, Sitara (2013) Azerbaijan: Emphasizing IDPs’ Right to Return over Right to Stay Put, *Eurasianet.org*, 19 November, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-emphasizing-idps-right-to-return-over-right-to-stay-put> (Accessed: 7 September 2024).
- Aliyev, Mirza (2022) The State-of-the-art Smart Village that Offers a Model for the EU, *The Parliament Magazine*, 14 June, <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/partner/article/towards-100-eu-smart-villages-in-the-eu-and-its-neighbourhood> (Accessed: 9 November 2024).
- Effendi, Rena (2021) ‘I don’t even know if my home still exists’, *National Geographic*, 5 February, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/i-dont-know-if-my-home-still-exists-nagorno-karabakh-conflict> (Accessed: 6 September 2024).
- Guliyev, Farid (forthcoming) Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Azerbaijan: From Protracted Displacement to ‘Great Return,’ forthcoming in *Central Asian Survey*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2024.2422442>.
- Gureyeva-Aliyeva, Yulia/ Huseynov, Tabib (2011) Can You Be an IDP for Twenty Years? Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute – London School of Economics Project on Internal Displacement. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/12_idp_host_communities_azerbaijan.pdf (Accessed: 6 September 2024).
- Hajiyeva, Gunay (2024) Shusha’s Revival Continues with Returning Families in Karabakh Region, *Caspian News*, 8 September, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/shushas-revival-continues-with-returning-families-in-karabakh-region-2024-9-8-0/> (Accessed: 7 September 2024).
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) (2010) IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute – University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/iasc-framework-durable-solutions-internally-displaced-persons> (Accessed: 6 September 2024).
- Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) (2023) Global Internal Displacement Database. Available at: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data/> (Accessed: 10 November 2024).

- International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2023) Migration in the Republic of Azerbaijan: A Country Profile 2013-2021. Geneva: IOM, <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/pub2023-059-migration-in-the-republic-of-azerbaijan.pdf> (Accessed: 9 November 2024).
- Kucera, Joshua (2024) Armenians, Azerbaijanis Still Dreaming of Home a Year After Karabakh Recaptured, *RFE/RL*, 20 September, <https://www.rferl.org/a/nagorno-karabakh-armenia-azerbaijan-september-offensive/33125293.html> (Accessed: 9 November 2024).
- Mammadli, Nargiz (2023) Next Group of Azerbaijani IDPs Relocate to Lachin City, *Caspian News*, 15 November, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/next-group-of-azerbaijani-idps-relocate-to-lachin-city-2023-11-14-34/> (Accessed: 6 September 2024).
- Musayev, Akif/ Aliyev, Khatai/ Maharramova, Shabnam/ Gazanfarli, Mirvari (2022) Postwar Karabakh: What is the Resettlement Potential?, *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 128, July, 10–14, <https://laender-analysen.de/cad/pdf/CaucasusAnalyticalDigest128.pdf> (Accessed: 6 September 2024).
- UNICEF (2024) The Lingering Impact of Landmines on Children and Families in Azerbaijan, 4 April, <https://www.unicef.org/eca/stories/lingering-impact-landmines-children-and-families-azerbaijan> (Accessed: 5 November 2024).
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2024) Cash Assistance Factsheet – Armenia, July, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/110128> (Accessed: 6 September 2024).
- US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (2002) World Refugee Survey 2002 – Azerbaijan, 10 June, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/uscri/2002/en/80028> (Accessed: 6 September 2024).
- Wistrand, Jennifer S. (2023) A Development Approach to a Protracted IDP Situation: Lessons from Azerbaijan, *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 11(1): 23–40.
- World Bank (2011) Azerbaijan: Building Assets and Promoting Self Reliance: The Livelihoods of Internally Displaced Persons. Washington, DC: The World Bank. Available at: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/zh/474641468206973883/pdf/AAA640ESW0P1180ort0complete0highres.pdf> (Accessed: 5 November 2024).
- World Bank (2023) Internally Displaced Persons in Azerbaijan: Livelihoods, Services and Intentions. Washington, DC: The World Bank. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/40011> (Accessed: 9 October 2024).

Appendix:

Table 1: Summary of Fieldwork Areas and Interview Participants (2011)

Location	Participants	Interview Settings
Baku	IDPs, local residents	Azerbaijan Pedagogical University dormitory, former hostel in Pirshagy settlement
Ganja	IDPs, local residents	Dormitory of the Pedagogical University, administrative building
Agdam District*	IDPs, host community members, local officials	Villages of Ahmadagali and Tazakend
Tartar District	IDPs, local residents	Villages of Gapanly, Garagadji, Askipara, Ismayilbeyli, Sahlabad, Huseynli
Sumgayit	IDP official from Gubadly district	Sumgayit
Barda	ICRC staff	Barda office
Baku	Oxfam staff	Baku office

*Azerbaijani-controlled part

Note: Fieldwork conducted in September and October 2011; interviews with IDPs and local residents were typically spontaneous, with random selection or small group meetings of 5–10 participants (for more information on the methodology used, see Gureyeva-Aliyeva/ Huseynov 2011: 47–48). The data for this article is derived exclusively from interviews conducted within IDP communities.

Appendix continued overleaf.

Table 2: List of Interviewees, 2023

1	Gender Expert/Consultant, herself an IDP from Jabrayil District
2	Female IDP from Aghdam City
3	Economics Professor
4	Public Sector Professional, herself an IDP from Zangilan District
5	Consultant with Local NGO
6	Government Official
7	Project Coordinator, himself an IDP from Lachin District
8	Consultant with International Organization
9	Gender Expert
10	Gender Consultant
11	Independent Analyst, himself an IDP from Shusha (Upper Karabakh)
12	Independent Researcher
13	IDP from Fuzuli District
14	Project Manager, himself an IDP from Fuzuli District
15	Local Think-Tank Analyst, himself an IDP from Kalbajar

Note: Interviews were conducted by the author in April–May and September–October 2023

ANALYSIS

Georgia's State Policy for IDP Integration in the View of IDPs

Tatia Chikhladze (Regional Institute for Security Studies, Tbilisi, and British Teaching University of Georgia)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000712914

Abstract

This paper examines the challenges and progress in the integration of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Georgia following conflicts in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia since the 1990s. These conflicts resulted in large-scale displacement, with IDPs facing significant obstacles, including poor living conditions, stigmatisation, and lack of socio-economic support. The Georgian state initially focused on the right of return over integration, leading to limited support for IDPs' integration into host communities. However, in 2007, a new state strategy shifted towards providing housing, improving socio-economic conditions and implementing long-term integration policies. Based on interviews and a focus group with IDPs and experts, findings suggest that while IDPs today enjoy greater social acceptance and stability than in years past, much of this progress can be attributed to individual resilience rather than the effectiveness of state policies. Persistent issues include incompletely implemented housing policies and insufficient communication regarding available social services, highlighting areas for improvement in fostering comprehensive IDP integration.

Introduction

Soon after Georgia gained independence in 1991, conflicts erupted in the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (also known as South Ossetia), leading to the displacement of between 220,000 and 240,000 people. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) who fled from the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic mainly settled in the neighbouring regions of Samegrelo and Imereti, as well

as in large cities, such as Tbilisi and Batumi. IDPs from Tskhinvali/South Ossetia have mostly settled in areas close to the region of Shida Kartli (World Bank 2016). After the 2008 Russo-Georgian war over Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, 20,000 more people were displaced. As a result, by February 2020, the total number of registered IDPs reached 283,271, representing around 8% of the Georgian population (Bolkvadze 2020).

IDPs in Georgia have suffered from the very beginning due to severe economic limitations (an absolute majority being unemployed) as well as poor mental health due to traumatic memories of the conflict. But even in light of these other challenges, poor housing conditions and living standards have been the biggest problem for IDPs for years (Segar 2022).

In the period during which Georgia experienced significant IDP flows, the country was facing an (unrelated) serious economic and political crisis; therefore, IDPs were not provided with decent living conditions, instead being distributed to temporary shelters. These facilities were often old school buildings, student dormitories, or hospitals that were not appropriately adapted for people to live in. At that point, the state had neither the economic means, nor the political will to plan for long-term housing for IDPs. The general attitude was that IDPs would soon return to their homes. Thus, in the beginning of their journey as IDPs, in addition to facing serious trauma from the war, the displaced also had to deal with geographic isolation from their relatives, the necessity of rapid adaptation to new environments and ways of life, and widespread stigma within Georgian society towards internally displaced persons.

This paper explores how the Georgian state has attempted to integrate IDPs into host communities, what type of regulatory framework currently exists to facilitate IDP integration, and how successful these integration efforts are in practice. In addition to the desk research, this contribution relies on the results of 25 face-to-face semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion conducted with both Georgian experts working on IDP-related issues and IDPs from Abkhazia, as well as first-wave and second-wave IDPs from Tskhinvali/South Ossetia. These interviews were conducted between August and November 2023 in Tskaltubo, Khoni, Gori, and Tserovani.

Lack of IDP Integration Policy and Development of the Strategy on IDPs

From the very beginning, Georgian state policy was mainly focused on the right of IDPs to return to their homes; less attention was paid to the issue of integrating them into their host communities. Until the policy shifted in 2007, this had a negative impact on the integration of IDPs into local communities, failing to improve their socio-economic situation and resulting in their further marginalisation (UNHCR 2009).

Georgia's integration policy regarding IDPs has from the very beginning been quite controversial. There have been debates around whether integration of IDPs into local communities was in conflict with the process of returning them to their homes, and whether it would be interpreted as an acceptance of the loss of break-

away territories (Böll Foundation 2011). IDPs themselves also had a negative attitude towards integration into the host community since they were afraid that this process would result in losing the right to return to their homes. The outcome of such policy, according to one of the internally displaced persons, was that many years have passed 'but we are still guests in Tbilisi and we are still enemies in Sokhumi [Abkhazia]' (Lomsadze 2022).

According to Irakli Bokuchava, head of the Societal Programmes Fund, a non-governmental organisation, despite these debates, at the insistence of civil society organisations and international organisations, significant emphasis was placed on the issue of IDP integration; key stakeholders agreed that integration would be understood as creating decent living conditions for IDPs and engaging them with the host society. Bokuchava thinks that if before 2007 IDPs were seen as a burden on Georgian society, since 2006–2007 they have been presented as a very important part of society and as contributing to the development of the country (Böll Foundation 2011).

This change in attitude was caused by the adoption of the State Strategy for Internally Displaced Persons in 2007, which in addition to the creation of conditions of dignified and safe return also recognised as its main aims integration and the improvement of the socio-economic conditions of IDPs (UNHCR 2009). Thus, since the adoption of the strategy, though the issue of territorial integrity remained a central issue, additional efforts have been directed to the development of a legal framework to better protect IDP rights (Segar 2022). The underlying logic of these efforts was to give an opportunity to IDPs to live decent lives until they had the opportunity to voluntarily and safely return to their homes. Later on, several medium-term Action Plans for the implementation of the State Strategy on IDPs were developed. In addition to creating conditions for safe and dignified return, Action Plans set three main goals for the state: firstly, to support durable housing solutions, secondly, to improve livelihoods and socio-economic integration, and thirdly, to raise awareness among IDPs about the services available to them (World Bank 2016).

The next sections aim to present the views of IDPs from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia (first wave and second wave) on the successes and failures of the state policy aimed at their integration into the host communities.

Comparison of IDP Integration in the 1990s and Today

The beginning of Georgia's IDP journey in the 1990s was especially challenging, as at that time the entire country was suffering from the consequences of political unrest, civil war, and economic collapse. For this reason, the overall environment into which IDPs were forced to flee was not conducive to providing decent liv-

ing conditions for them. Local communities, themselves suffering from economic hardships, in many cases were not very friendly, as still clearly recalled by the majority of IDP respondents.

Many IDPs stated that there was a lack of awareness within host communities about the situation in the conflict zones. Some would ask them why they would choose to leave their homes, clearly having only a very vague idea about the situation in the breakaway regions during the hot phase of the conflict. They would refer to IDPs as ‘refugees’, an inaccurate term as newcomers did not cross the state border, but were rather forced to move to safer areas within their own country. As stated by several respondents, the fact that IDPs received certain state-provided assistance, as well as substantial international aid, also caused irritation within local communities during the 1990s.

As one IDP respondent residing in Gori, who fled from Tskhinvali/South Ossetia in the 1990s, said during their interview, locals saw IDPs as ‘representatives of the lower class and uneducated’ constantly asking for assistance. The same respondent added that due to the negative attitudes of the locals, it was very difficult to gain new friends in the local community, let alone to start a family there (IDP interview, personal communication, 11 October 2023). Another IDP residing in the same city stated that in a country like Georgia with limited state capacity, when facing certain challenges, it is crucial to look to your own immediate network of friends and relatives for assistance. Unfortunately, since they have only few local friends and their relatives are far away, IDPs have to face a broad set of challenges all alone (IDP interview, personal communication, 12 October 2023).

One respondent residing in Tskaltubo in western Georgia recalled that soon after they arrived in their new home, children were preparing to go to school and, despite facing serious economic challenges, parents did their best to prepare them for school in terms of buying books and uniforms. But on the first day of school, children and parents faced a very harsh reality when local parents protested against including ‘refugee’ pupils in the same classes as their children. As a result, the school administration opened separate classes for IDP pupils in Tskaltubo (IDP interview, personal communication, 16 August 2023). In addition, many respondents remember that in the 1990s and early 2000s, many young people studying at school or university tried to hide the fact that they were IDPs to avoid pity, insensitive statements, and even rejection by their peers.

According to IDP respondents participating in interviews in August–October 2023, the attitude of local communities has changed significantly in the intervening years. A large number of IDPs now live in significantly improved conditions, a significant proportion

having been provided with decent housing from the state; some have started small businesses and improved their socio-economic standing in this way. The majority of respondents stated that today they do not face the same type of attitude from local communities as they did in the 1990s; today, they are viewed as equal members of society. Today there are many mixed marriages as well. Since those IDPs who were provided with housing live in well-built new settlements, many locals now actually try to buy apartments in those same settlements. Another resident of the IDP compact settlement in Tserovani, which was built after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war to accommodate the new wave of IDPs, stated that parents from adjacent villages are trying to enrol their children in schools located in the IDP settlement, since school infrastructure in those villages is much less developed compared to that of Tserovani (Expert interview, personal communication, 8 October 2023).

Despite the fact that locals’ attitudes towards IDPs have changed substantially and IDPs themselves, especially the new generation born into that status, feel much more integrated into the local community today than their parents did 30 years ago, the majority of respondents explain this changed reality with their own hard work, and not that much with the state-led policy of IDP integration. Even though there is a relatively positive trend in terms of IDP integration into local communities, some challenges still persist.

Strategy vs Reality: Housing Policy and Persisting Social Vulnerabilities

As mentioned above, in the 1990s, the Georgian state was not ready to provide proper living conditions to IDPs, and the general approach was that they would soon be able to return to their homes; therefore, officials were not at that point thinking about long-term housing policy for IDPs. As a result of this, many of the displaced individuals who did not have relatives within the territory controlled by the Georgian authorities were forced to break into old and abandoned facilities in order to have at least some type of shelter (Lomsadze 2022).

The long-term housing policy of IDPs officially started in 2007, when the State Strategy for IDPs was developed with the help of international governmental and non-governmental organisations such as the UN Refugee Agency, the Danish Refugee Council, and the Norwegian Refugee Council in Georgia. Since 2009, the government has started a programme to provide long-term housing for IDPs (Kokaia 2022). According to the data provided by the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Defence of Georgia, the key agency dealing with IDP-related issues, as of 2022, 92,079 IDP households were registered in Georgia. Of these, the state has provided housing for around 50,000 displaced families (Transparency Interna-

tional 2022). Therefore, tens of thousands of IDP households are still waiting for housing; a significant part of these live in facilities posing a threat to their health.

When providing housing, based on the existing criteria, those households are prioritised which live in facilities posing an increased risk to life and health, though there are no exact statistics available on how many families live in such conditions. IDPs are organising protest actions in order to draw attention to their problems. In January 2022, Zurab Kiria, an IDP living for thirty years in a Soviet-era sanatorium turned IDP shelter in deplorable conditions, committed suicide to draw attention to the dire living conditions in his building (Lomsadze 2022).

Interviews with both experts and IDPs showed that some of them have questions on whether housing distribution is implemented in a fair and transparent way.¹ Another key question is to what extent the current housing policy contributes to the integration of IDPs into local communities. The state's model is to provide compact settlements for internally displaced persons, settlements which in the majority of cases are isolated from the rest of the society. One of the expert interviewees stated that compact IDP settlements do not create good conditions for IDP integration into the local community (Expert interview, personal communication, 18 August 2023).

Thus, even in those cases in which the housing problem has been solved, settlements of IDPs are relatively isolated, which has a negative impact on the availability of employment opportunities for residents. IDPs for this reason in many cases face the unfortunate necessity of economic migration and family separation (Amnesty International 2010). The majority of Georgian IDPs live below the poverty line, and their main source of income is state-provided assistance, which has been described by IDPs as too low to cover even the most basic needs (Pape 2022). IDPs mentioned during interviews that they call this assistance 'bread money', though since the amount of this assistance has not increased for over a decade while IDPs face continual inflation, they stressed that this amount of 45 GEL (15.50 Euros) is not enough even to provide a household with bread for a full month.

Strategy vs Reality: Awareness of IDPs about Relevant Assistance

One of the main factors contributing to the successful integration of IDPs into local communities in Georgia is effective communication with them about IDP-relevant services and projects which aim to improve their socio-economic situation. State agencies, as well as non-governmental organisations working on IDP-related issues, are responsible for this communication. Poor commu-

nication with IDPs and lack of even basic information about their rights, services, and employment opportunities has been mentioned as a problem by several reports. All of this deepens the IDPs' isolation and reinforces their dependence on the state (Amnesty International 2010). IDPs stress that their primary source of information is their own social network; lack of information is a serious constraint in taking advantage of available assistance. Having a comprehensive legal framework for IDP support is not enough if it is not accompanied by effective communication to ensure that IDPs have equal information and opportunity to access relevant services (World Bank 2016).

According to one of the respondents, whose organisation conducted research on this topic, lack of relevant information about social packages is something almost all IDPs complain of (Expert interview, personal communication, 6 October 2023). According to another expert working on IDP-related issues, the target audience is not fully informed about relevant assistance packages because there are many stakeholders providing IDP-relevant services: the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs; the Agency of IDPs, Eco-Migrants and Livelihood Provision (through its regional branches, this agency assists those who were forced to leave their homes due to natural disasters, numbering approximately 18,000 individuals, together with conflict-induced IDPs); self-governance bodies at the regional level; and civil society organisations.

Therefore, the relevant information for IDPs is widely dispersed, and is not provided in a centralised or accessible way. There are also various channels for accessing relevant information, including social media, SMS services, and communications from individual official bodies, local regional agencies, and non-governmental organisations. There have been cases in which local governing bodies at the regional level are not properly informed about social packages offered by official bodies at the central level, resulting in a significant part of the relevant information not reaching target audiences (Expert interview, personal communication, 10 August 2023). According to one of the respondents, another challenge is how to 'translate' relevant information from complex official and legal language to colloquial language so that everyone can understand it; in this context, regional NGOs are playing a very important role (Expert interview, personal communication, 10 August 2023).

Overall, both experts and IDP respondents agree that regional branches of state agencies, and particularly of the Agency of IDPs, Eco-Migrants and Live-

¹ There is a general trend in Georgia that many experts on IDP-related issues are IDPs themselves. IDPs were the ones who started the first non-governmental organisations in the 1990s working on IDP issues; therefore, all of the field's top experts today are themselves IDPs.

lihood Provision, should be more proactive in sharing relevant information with their target audiences, and that there should be a special portal dedicated to IDP-related social packages. That way, interested individuals would be able to easily access all the relevant information about who is eligible for what type of assistance.

Conclusion

The main aim of this paper was to study how the Georgian state has attempted to integrate IDPs into local communities, what type of regulatory framework has been developed for these purposes, and how IDPs themselves assess these integration efforts. The evolution of Georgia's IDP

policy from an initial focus on return to the inclusion of integration strategies marks an important shift. However, the reality on the ground often diverges from the intended strategy. While some IDPs have successfully integrated into their host communities and improved their socio-economic conditions, many continue to face challenges such as inadequate housing, poverty, unemployment, and isolation. Some progress has been made since the early 1990s, particularly in improving housing and fostering a more inclusive societal attitude, but significant gaps remain in terms of ensuring sustainable livelihoods, comprehensive integration, and effective communication with IDPs.

About the Author

Dr *Tatia Chikhladze* is Senior Research Fellow at the Regional Institute for Security Studies (RISS) in Tbilisi, Georgia and Affiliated Associate Professor at the British Teaching University of Georgia.

Acknowledgements

The empirical research on which this publication is based has been conducted by the author for the Collaborative Research Center 1342 'Global Dynamics of Social Policy' at the University of Bremen. The Center is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation)—Project Number 374666841—SFB 1342.

References

- Amnesty International (2010) In the Waiting Room: Internally Displaced People in Georgia, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/eur560032010en.pdf> (Accessed: 7 October 2024).
- Bolkvadze, Tamar (2020) *Coordination and participation in Georgia – what worked and what didn't: Good Examples and Challenges from Georgia*. Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). Available at: https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2020/downloads/background_papers/2020-IDMC-GRID-background-georgia.pdf (Accessed: 21 October 2024).
- Böll Foundation (2011) Public Discussion on 23 March 2011 on the topic 'IDP Integration in today's Georgian society' [კაინრიპ ბიოლის ფონდის ოფისში 2011 წლის 23 მარტს გამართული საჯარო დისკუსია თემაზე „დევნილთა ინტეგრაციის საკითხები დღევანდელ ქართულ საზოგადოებაში“]. Tbilisi: Heinrich Böll Foundation, https://ge.boell.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/IDP_integration_issues_Ge-1.pdf (Accessed: 6 October 2024).
- Kokaia, Lana (2022) 30 years of waiting for an apartment – why do we have displaced people who still don't have a house [30 წელი ბინის მოლოდინში – რატომ გვყავს დევნილები, რომლებსაც სახლი დღემდე არ აქვთ], [radiotavisupleba.ge](https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31909883.html), 22 June, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31909883.html> (Accessed on 9 October 2024).
- Lomsadze, Giorgi (2022) Georgia's displaced people: A life in limbo, [eurasianet](https://eurasianet.org/georgias-displaced-people-a-life-in-limbo), 3 February, <https://eurasianet.org/georgias-displaced-people-a-life-in-limbo> (Accessed: 27 September 2024).
- Pape, Ulla (2022) Internal Displacement in the South Caucasus: Why has Vulnerability Increased in the COVID-Pandemic?, *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 126, 3–7, https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/87048/87048_1.pdf?sequence=1 (Accessed: 14 November 2024).
- Segar, Rhiannon (2022) Internally Displaced and Isolated: the failings of IDP integration in Georgia, *Lossi*, No. 36, 4 February, <https://lossi36.com/2022/02/04/internally-displaced-and-isolated-the-failings-of-idp-integration-in-georgia/> (Accessed: 7 July 2024).
- Transparency International (2022) Some facts regarding the resettlement of IDPs [რამდენიმე ფაქტი დევნილების განსახლებასთან დაკავშირებით], 22 January, <https://transparency.ge/ge/post/ramdenime-pakti-devnilebis-gansaxlebastan-dakavshirebit> (Accessed: 19 October 2024).
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2009) Protection of Internally Displaced Persons in Georgia: A Gap Analysis. Geneva: UNHCR. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/4ad827f59.pdf> (Accessed: 11 September 2024).
- World Bank (2016) *Georgia – Transitioning from Status to Needs Based Assistance for IDPs: A Poverty and Social Impact Analysis*. Washington, DC: The World Bank. Available at: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/493981468030331770/pdf/IDP-PSIA-Georgia-revised-Feb-2016.pdf> (Accessed: 23 October 2024).

ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST**Editorial Board**

Lusine Badalyan (Frankfurt School of Finance & Management), Sandra Fernandes (University of Minho), Farid Guliyev (American University in Dubai), Diana Lezhava (American Research Institute of the South Caucasus, Tbilisi), Lili Di Puppò (University of Rijeka), Jeronim Perović (University of Zurich), Abel Polese (Dublin City University and Tallinn University of Technology), Koba Turmanidze (CRRC-Georgia, Tbilisi)

Corresponding Editors

Heiko Pleines and Andreas Heinrich, both Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen, pleines@uni-bremen.de / heinrich@uni-bremen.de

Coordination Layout and Publication

Matthias Neumann, Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen, fsopr@uni-bremen.de

About the Caucasus Analytical Digest

The Caucasus Analytical Digest (CAD) is a bimonthly internet publication jointly produced by the CRRC-Georgia (<https://crrc.ge/en/>), the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen (<https://www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de/>), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich (<https://css.ethz.ch/>), the Center for Eastern European Studies (CEES) at the University of Zurich (<https://www.cees.uzh.ch/de.html>), and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Caucasus Analytical Digest analyzes the political, economic, and social situation in the three South Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia within the context of international and security dimensions of this region's development. All contributions to the Caucasus Analytical Digest undergo a fast-track peer review.

To subscribe or unsubscribe to the Caucasus Analytical Digest, please visit our web page at <https://css.ethz.ch/en/publications/cad.html>

An online archive with indices (topics, countries, authors) is available at <https://laender-analysen.de/cad>

Participating Institutions**Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich**

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich is a center of competence for Swiss and international security policy. It offers security policy expertise in research, teaching, and consultancy. The CSS promotes understanding of security policy challenges as a contribution to a more peaceful world. Its work is independent, practice-relevant, and based on a sound academic footing.

The CSS combines research and policy consultancy and, as such, functions as a bridge between academia and practice. It trains highly qualified junior researchers and serves as a point of contact and information for the interested public.

Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen

Founded in 1982, the Research Centre for East European Studies (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa) at the University of Bremen is dedicated to the interdisciplinary analysis of socialist and post-socialist developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The major focus is on the role of dissent, opposition and civil society in their historic, political, sociological and cultural dimensions.

With a unique archive on dissident culture under socialism and with an extensive collection of publications on Central and Eastern Europe, the Research Centre regularly hosts visiting scholars from all over the world.

One of the core missions of the institute is the dissemination of academic knowledge to the interested public. This includes regular e-mail newsletters covering current developments in Central and Eastern Europe.

CRRC-Georgia

CRRC-Georgia is a non-governmental, non-profit research organization, which collects, analyzes and publishes policy relevant data on social, economic and political trends in Georgia. CRRC-Georgia, together with CRRC-Armenia and CRRC-Azerbaijan, constitutes a network of research centers with the common goal of strengthening social science research and public policy analysis in the South Caucasus.

Center for Eastern European Studies (CEES) at the University of Zurich

The Center for Eastern European Studies (CEES) at the University of Zurich is a center of excellence for Russian, Eastern European and Eurasian studies. It offers expertise in research, teaching and consultancy. The CEES is the University's hub for interdisciplinary and contemporary studies of a vast region, comprising the former socialist states of Eastern Europe and the countries of the post-Soviet space. As an independent academic institution, the CEES provides expertise for decision makers in politics and in the field of the economy. It serves as a link between academia and practitioners and as a point of contact and reference for the media and the wider public.

Any opinions expressed in the Caucasus Analytical Digest are exclusively those of the authors.

Reprint possible with permission by the editors.

Responsible editor for this issue: Andreas Heinrich

Language editor: Nathanael C. Brown

Layout: Marta Warmińska, Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, and Michael Clemens

ISSN 1867 9323 © 2025 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

Research Centre for East European Studies • Country Analytical Digests • Klagenfurter Str. 8 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: fsopr@uni-bremen.de • Internet: <https://laender-analysen.de/cad>