



REFUGEES & INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPS) IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: THE NUMBERS GAME

KEY POINTS

- The South Caucasus has witnessed proportionally huge displacements of population since 1991.
- The region's protracted conflicts have left large IDP communities in Azerbaijan and Georgia, which place a significant economic burden on the Azeri and Georgian governments.
- These communities' right of eventual return to their homes needs to be balanced with avoiding their social marginalisation in the interim.

DETAIL

This paper looks at the numbers of refugees and internally-displaced persons (IDPs) currently living in the three South Caucasus states – **Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia** – each of which has experienced major population shifts over the last two decades as a result of territorial conflicts in the region. It also considers the politics surrounding the topic of refugees and IDPs in these three societies, as well as looking at how the region's unrecognised entities (Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh and South Ossetia) deal with the concept of 'refugees' and 'IDPs' in their respective cases. Figures in each case are attached as a separate annex.

The paper proceeds from the commonly-accepted definitions of the two terms, i.e.:

- A **refugee** is a person who is outside the country of their nationality and unwilling or unable to return there for fear of persecution.
- An **IDP** is a person who has been forced to flee their place of habitual residence but has not crossed an internationally-recognised state border¹.

Armenia

Latest UNHCR figures show Armenia as hosting a registered refugee population of just over 3,000. It has no officially-registered IDPs². Additionally, Armenian has experienced

¹ It should be noted that both Azerbaijan and Georgia define the term 'IDP' very broadly, e.g. including within it children born to IDPs in their current situation of displacement, thus keeping the numbers of their respective IDP communities high.

² In contrast to the early 1990s, when Armenia's IDP population swelled to around 400,000 in the wake of the catastrophic earthquake at Spitak (December 1988). These IDPs have now either left Armenia altogether, returned to their original homes or re-settled in other parts of the country.

an influx of around 12,000 ethnic Armenians from Syria over the last 18 months; most of these, however, appear to have been granted Armenian citizenship³.

These modest figures mask a remarkable shift in the size of Armenia's refugee population, which as recently as 2005 was recorded by the UNHCR at the level of 220,000 – the vast majority of them (around 170,000) ethnic Armenians who previously resided in Azerbaijan and fled to Armenia during the early 1990s⁴. The dramatic decline in their recorded numbers appears to be the result of three factors:

- Their onward emigration out of Armenia (primarily to Russia, although a relatively small number appear to have re-settled in Nagorny Karabakh).
- The granting of Armenian citizenship to many of them⁵.
- A concurrent acceptance by the Armenian government (and by the individuals concerned) that they no longer harboured any realistic ambition of returning to their original country of residence.

Azerbaijan

According to the UNHCR, Azerbaijan has a recorded refugee population of 1,495 and an IDP population of just over 600,000. **This makes Azerbaijan host to one of the largest populations of displaced persons in the world in per capita terms** (Azerbaijan's population stands at around 9.6 million). The IDP population is comprised almost exclusively of former residents of Nagorny Karabakh and the surrounding districts of Azerbaijan now under Armenian control, who fled their homes during the armed conflict of 1991-94.

In their public statements, **Azerbaijani officials from the President downwards continue to refer frequently to the country's 'one million-strong community of refugees and IDPs'**. This discrepancy in numbers is explained by two factors: a) the Azerbaijani authorities give a slightly higher number (686,586) for the country's IDP population than the UNCHR, and b) the 'one million' figure encompasses the estimated 250,000 ethnic Azeri 'refugees' who fled Armenia in the early 1990s. This latter community, however, has never been formally registered by the UNHCR as refugees – the vast majority of these people, it can be assumed, have by now either left Azerbaijan altogether or been granted Azerbaijani citizenship (i.e. a mirror image of the analogous development in Armenia).

Georgia

³ Some media reports have also suggested that Armenian refugees from Syria are being re-settled in the occupied areas of Azerbaijan around NK. There is currently no reliable evidence to confirm this, however, and in any case even if this is taking place the numbers involved are likely to be small.

⁴ The remaining 50,000 were comprised of ethnic Armenians fleeing conflicts in other parts of the FSU (Tajikistan, Georgia, North Ossetia).

⁵ The Armenian State Migration Service has reported that by 2013 citizenship had been granted to nearly 84,000 ethnic Armenians who originally arrived in the country as refugees.

Georgia has an officially-registered refugee population of 682 (mostly Chechens) and an IDP population of around 240,000, the latter comprised of former residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia who fled those locations in the early 1990s.

Unlike in the case of Azerbaijan & Armenia, **the conflicts that erupted in Georgia in the early 1990s did not lead to a complete disruption of people-to-people contacts** between 'Georgia proper' and its two breakaway entities. Thus, ethnic Georgians have continued to live within the territories controlled by the de-facto Abkhaz and (to a much lesser extent) South Ossetian authorities.

In the case of **Abkhazia** (where the ethnic Georgian population was always the larger of the two, especially in the entity's eastern Gali district, where ethnic Georgians have historically constituted the majority), there has been a significant informal return of IDPs from 'Georgia proper' since the mid-1990s. Although precise figures are hard to obtain, it's estimated that the Gali region currently has a population of around 45,000, almost all of whom are ethnic Georgians (or, more correctly, Mingrelians, a sub-group of the Georgian ethnos). Many of these people continue to move back and forth across the administrative boundary line between Abkhazia and 'Georgia proper', for trading purposes, schooling and in order to claim the regular financial benefits paid by the Georgian government to registered IDPs.

The Unrecognised Entities

The region's three breakaway 'states' – Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh and South Ossetia – also claim to be dealing with 'refugee' and 'IDP' issues of their own. In their cases, however, definitions become problematic, given that their self-declared 'independence' is generally not recognised⁶. The following, therefore, represents no more than a summary of how the de-facto authorities of these entities themselves describe their own situations in this regard:

Abkhazia has no IDPs, but hosts a refugee community of around 500, largely comprised of ethnic Abkhazians formerly residing in Syria who have fled the fighting there since 2011. Given their ethnicity, it is likely that all of these will in due course be granted Abkhazian 'citizenship' if they choose to stay on a permanent basis.

Nagorny Karabakh (NK) purports to host 30,000 refugees and an IDP community of the same size. The former category is comprised of ethnic Armenians previously residing in 'Azerbaijan proper' (e.g. Baku, Sumgait, Nakhichevan), who forcibly left their homes in the early 1990s, initially for Armenia, and have subsequently been re-settled in NK. The latter consists of those Armenians who previously resided in the former Shaumyan district of the Azerbaijan SSR (currently part of Azerbaijan's Goranboy district), to which the NK de-facto authorities lay a territorial claim. Given that the entity's total population is barely over 140,000, the NK de-facto authorities are fond of asserting in public that it is in fact they, rather than Azerbaijan, who host the largest refugee/IDP population in the world in per-capita terms.

⁶ Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been recognised as 'independent states' only by Russia and a small handful of other countries. The 'independence' of the 'Nagorny Karabakh Republic' has not been recognised by any other UN member-state.

South Ossetia claims to host around 2,000 ‘refugees’, i.e. ethnic Ossetians formerly resident in Tbilisi or other parts of ‘Georgia proper’ who fled to the entity during the armed conflict of the early 1990s. Those Ossetians who were internally displaced within the entity during the conflict have by now either returned to their original homes or left the entity altogether.

Conclusions

Refugee and IDP-related issues remain deeply politicised within the region and constitute a significant obstacle to the peaceful settlement of its protracted conflicts. In proportional terms, the South Caucasus has witnessed huge displacements of population over the last two decades, causing enormous suffering and hardship to those affected. The right of refugees and IDPs to return to their homes is central to Tbilisi and Baku’s vision for restoring their territorial integrity – and in principle, this is supported by the international community as a necessary element of any long-term settlement of the conflicts in question. But there has been very little over the last two decades by way of detailed discussions (e.g. within the Minsk Process or in the past in UN-brokered talks over Abkhazia) on the practical obstacles to achieving this goal and how they might be overcome – e.g. proof of ownership of property, compensation for war damage, etc.

At the same time, a degree of selectivity is evident from all sides in terms of how the region’s refugee and IDP issues are deployed. Underpinning this is a dearth of reliable data on the views of displaced communities themselves – i.e. to what extent do they genuinely wish to return to their original homes (as opposed to feeling obliged to say so in order to avoid problems with their respective authorities); and if they don’t, how they feel issues of restitution/compensation should be dealt with⁷.

⁷ An [EU-funded report](#) by UK-based NGO Conciliation Resources in 2011 on attitudes among Georgia’s IDP community displaced from Abkhazia is one of the few pieces of detailed field research to have been conducted on this subject.