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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Guliyev, F. (2025). Durable Solutions and Return of IDPs in Azerbaijan. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 140, 13-20. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000712914>

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Durable Solutions and Return of IDPs in Azerbaijan

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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).

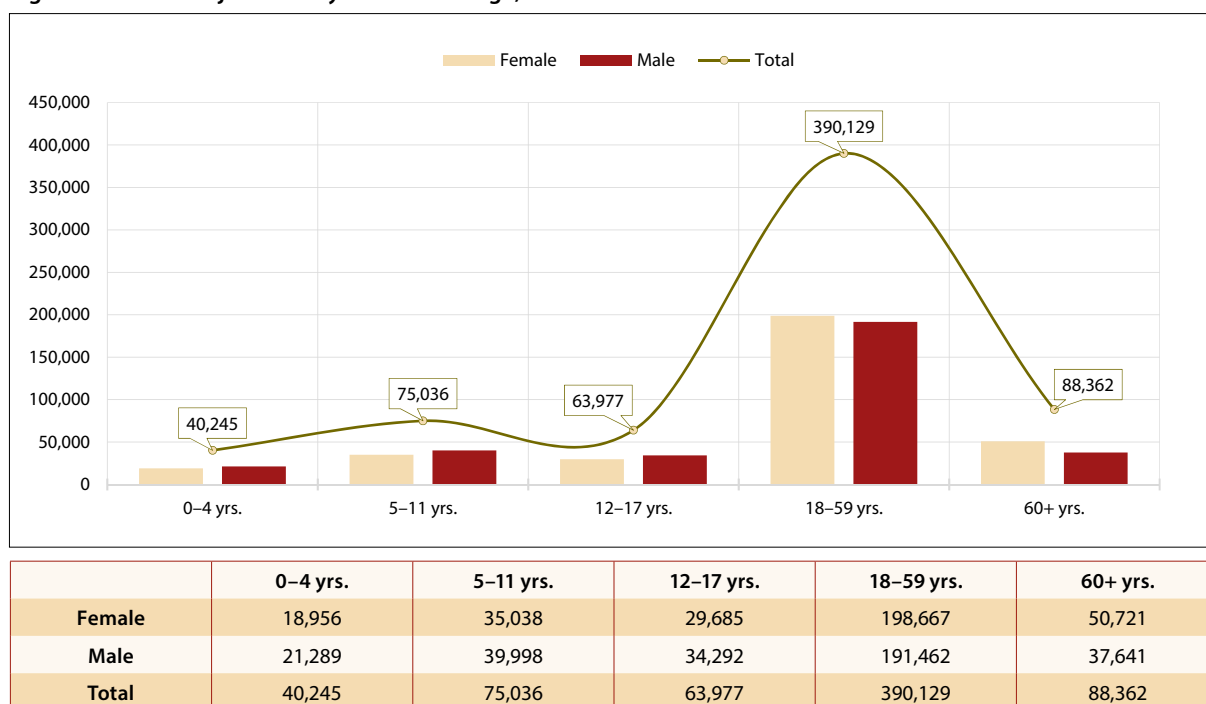
In the early 1990s, coupled with the state’s weak fiscal capacity, the influx of nearly one million IDPs

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

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.

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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

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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).