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General trends of migration processes and policy in post-Soviet Azerbaijan (immigration and emigration)

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Two decades of observation of migration processes that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union allow identifying the general trends and direction thereof. Moreover, one gets a clear idea about the tasks and positions of various political actors who have an effect on migration dynamic. In this paper an attempt is made to identify the most important trends and place them in the context of key political actors' positions.

For Azerbaijan the process of the Soviet Union collapse coincided with the Karabakh conflict¹ that aggravated economic problems in the country. For the first time in at least one and a half centuries large stocks of population came (or were forced to come) into motion. Migration processes of the late 1980s – early 1990s lead to the drastic change in the ethnic composition of the Azerbaijani population.

Thus, Karabakh conflict became the reason for the emergence of numerous refugees and displaced persons, who were mainly ethnic Azerbaijanis. Taking into account that the conflict is still unresolved, the number of refugees and displaced persons remains a political issue, rather than simply a statistical one. That is why the data on the number of displaced persons often differ in the statements of public officials and representatives of various non-governmental organizations. According to different estimates, from more than a million² to 788,765 thousand people³ should be labeled as displaced persons.

On the other hand, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Armenians became refugees from Azerbaijan. According to the 1989 census, 390.5 thousand ethnic Armenians lived in Azerbaijan. Two subsequent censuses carried out in 1999 and 2009 recorded 120.7 and 120.3 thousand Armenians respectively. The data of these censuses mainly record the number of Armenians residing in the region of Nagorny Karabakh that Azerbaijani authorities have no control of. This figure is tentative and is based on the estimate of the number of ethnic Armenians who resided in Karabakh according to the census of 1989.

The number of ethnic Russians has also drastically changed. 392.3 thousand Russians lived in the republic in 1989, while according to the censuses of 1999 and 2009 there were 141.7 and 119.3 thousand Russians respectively. One should also mention ethnic Jews: there were 30.8 thousand of them in Azerbaijan according to the census of 1989, while according to the censuses of 1999 and 2009 – 8.9 and 9.1 thousand respectively⁴. Thus, in the post-Soviet period a rather quick homogenization of Azerbaijani population took place.

By late 1990s gradual political and economic stabilization started and at the same time state migration policy became more specific. Until the second half of 1990s Azerbaijani authorities were mainly concerned with the regime of labor migration from Azerbaijan, as far as mass emigration of employable population and hence emigrants' money coming to the country allowed stabilizing the economic situation in Azerbaijan.

Primary concern was constituted by relations with the Russian Federation where the main flow of labor emigrants was directed⁵. In December 1994 Russia closed the border with Azerbaijan and this became a serious obstacle for labor migrants. Flight communication between the two countries could

¹ Period from the start of conflict until its escalation to war is usually indicated as 1988 – 1994. In May 1994 temporary cease-fire was concluded and the conflict remains unresolved.

² State Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Deals of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons. History. Downloaded from <http://www.refugees-idps-committee.gov.az/en/pages/2.html>, on February 29.

³ Huseinova I. (2001). Refugees, their position and role in contemporary Azerbaijani society, *Azerbaijan and Russia: Societies and States*, p. 323 – 336. Downloaded from http://www.sakharov-center.ru/publications/azrus/az_011.htm, on February 29.

⁴ For details see: 2008. Statistical Yearbook of Azerbaijan. Baku, p. 77; Yunusov A. Ethnic composition of the population of Azerbaijan according to the census of 1999. Downloaded from http://www.iea.ras.ru/topic/census/mon/yunus_mon2001.htm, on February 29.

⁵ Migration in the Republic of Azerbaijan: A Country Profile 2008, International Organization for Migration (IOM), p. 17.

not satisfy the transportation need of labor migrants. As a result of serious efforts undertaken by the previous president of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev a renewed treaty “On friendship, cooperation and mutual security” was signed in July 1997 in Moscow between Russia and Azerbaijan. The border was reopened and visa-free regime was established between Russia and Azerbaijan. In subsequent years Russian authorities occasionally tried to use labor migrants to put pressure on Azerbaijani political regime, but these attempts were short-term and did not represent a major threat for the migrants’ life and employment in Russia.

Activities of security and law enforcement agencies in Azerbaijan became the biggest obstacle for movement of labor migrants. We are primarily talking about the Ministry of Defense that until mid-2000s, though with a varying degree of harshness, exercised control over departure of men of conscription (and hence employable) age. However, this control did not become a real obstacle for mass flow of labor migrants and instead contributed to the flourishing corruption in this field.

Permanent membership of Azerbaijan in the CIS (starting from September 1993), in its turn, contributes to the preservation of visa-free regime with most other (in addition to Russia) member states of the Commonwealth and becomes a crucial condition for unimpeded movement of migrants. One should emphasize that though Russia is the main recipient country for labor migrants from Azerbaijan, large groups of migrants also travel to Ukraine, Kazakhstan and other CIS countries.

Close partnership relations with Turkey support the regime of free movement of migrants to some extent. Simplified visa regime in Turkey was completely abolished for Azerbaijan in 2010. However, Azerbaijan so far has failed to establish such a favorable visa regime with EU countries and the USA. As a result emigrants from Azerbaijan move to these countries by marrying⁶, using illegal channels or going to study.

Opportunity of staying in a country of education is associated with various scholarships and grants from international funds for education in the EU member states, USA etc. At the same time starting from 2000s active state policy is pursued to send students abroad. For instance, around 5 thousand students will go to the USA, Japan and the European Union within the program “State program for education of Azerbaijani young people in foreign countries in 2007-2015”⁷. Mandatory return to Azerbaijan is one of conditions for participation in this program.

There is no trustworthy statistics of the number of emigrants (both labor and those leaving for permanent residence). However, according to approximate estimates, we are talking about millions of emigrants. From one to one and a half million citizens of the country permanently or temporarily reside overseas⁸.

In general, during the post-Soviet period Azerbaijani authorities strived to pursue policy aimed at maintaining mass labor and permanent emigration from Azerbaijan. By early 2000s this policy became clearly outlined with adoption of a law “On state policy with regards to Azerbaijanis residing abroad” in December 2002, holding of the First Congress of Azerbaijanis of the World (Baku, November 2001) and establishment of the Committee on Affairs with Azerbaijanis Living Abroad (decree of 05.07.2002). Thus, Azerbaijani political regime demonstrated that it aims at formation of a diaspora, rather than mass return of emigrants to the republic.

At the same time Azerbaijan is also a recipient country for labor migrants. This is due to the overall revival of economy and primarily development of oil and gas industry. Moreover, one should also mention that during the Soviet period Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, became a large educational

⁶ Marriages to citizens of EU, USA etc., as well as marriages to ethnic Jews constitute a resource for migration.

⁷ Downloaded from <http://edu.gov.az/view.php?lang=ru&menu=256>, on February 29.

⁸ Let me emphasize that this estimate is given without taking into account migrants from the ethnic groups mentioned above (Armenians, Russians and Jews). At the same time, evaluating the total number of Azerbaijani migrants, one often forgets to mention that Lezgins, Talyshs, Kurds and other citizens of the country are calculated as part of this category.

center. No doubt, the quality of education reduced drastically during the post-Soviet period. However, universities of Azerbaijan still attract students from many countries, for instance, from Turkey, China etc. According to official data, 7,150 foreign students studied in Azerbaijan in 2008-2009⁹. Many students (primarily from Turkey) stay to work in Azerbaijan after they complete their studies.

By late 1990s authorities started paying close attention to immigration policy, which was reflected in adoption of the corresponding legislation. One of the first important laws was the “Law of Azerbaijan Republic on immigration” (of 22.12.1998)¹⁰. Under this law everyone gained the right to submit petition for immigration to the Republic of Azerbaijan and this petition is to be approved, if certain requirements are satisfied. In October 1999 the law “On labor migration” was adopted to regulate the rules of employment of foreigners in Azerbaijan¹¹. In 2002 the law on immigrant ID was signed¹².

In 2001 the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection started issuing individual permits for work in Azerbaijan. By 2006 such permits were obtained by 8,485 immigrants. In the meantime, until the State Migration Service was established, control over immigrants was exercised mainly by the Ministry of Interior. For instance, according to official data, 20,986 foreigners obtained temporary registration in police precincts at their places of residence in 2005¹³. According to the latest official information, 4,360 people contacted the State Migration Service of Azerbaijan regarding various matters in January 2012 (requests for temporary stay permits, prolongation of visas etc.). 1,122 foreigners violated administrative legislation of Azerbaijan. As a result 261 paid fines, 696 were instructed to leave the country, and 165 were expelled following an administrative procedure¹⁴.

The donors of labor migrants to Azerbaijan are Turkey, United Kingdom, Iran, Georgia, Pakistan, Philippines and a number of other countries¹⁵. One should emphasize that ethnic Azerbaijanis mainly come to Azerbaijan to work from Iran and Georgia. Some experts also point out that tens of thousands of immigrants might be in the territory without being recorded by official statistics¹⁶. However, it is impossible to verify this information and present any reliable figures. One can only state that in the context of high level of corruption of the state institutions considerable share of immigrants must indeed be unrecorded by official statistics.

In conclusion one should emphasize that despite large-scale migration official statistics records practically constant population growth in Azerbaijan. Thus, total population, according to the 1999 census, was 7,953.4 mln. people, and as of 2009 it was 8,896.9 mln. It is obvious that statistics did not take migration flows into account.

⁹ Downloaded from <http://edu.gov.az/view.php?lang=ru&menu=134>, on February 29.

¹⁰ Downloaded from <http://migration.gov.az/images/pdf/e4648c2607c8e316316a1388f6d09a16.pdf>, on February 29.

¹¹ Downloaded from <http://migration.gov.az/images/pdf/b4a7bbc25c4e936cedaa5ee6d958a75e.pdf>, on February 29.

¹² Downloaded from <http://migration.gov.az/images/pdf/0b3c44b1b3e9dafd811c99fb6892399d.pdf>, on February 29.

¹³ Migration in the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ibid., p. 14

¹⁴ Official statistical information of the State Migration Service of Azerbaijan, as of January 2012. Downloaded from <http://migration.gov.az/index.php?section=009&subsection=041&lang=ru&pageid=3036>, on February 29.

¹⁵ Azerbaijan Labor Migrant Survey Report (International Organization for Migration, IOM), 2008, Baku, pp. 16-21.

¹⁶ Migration in the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ibid., p. 14; Yunusov A. (2009). *Migration Processes in Azerbaijan*. Baku, pp. 210-235.