



CARIM EAST – CONSORTIUM FOR APPLIED RESEARCH ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

Co-financed by the European Union

Azerbaijan: Readmission, Return and Reintegration in the Socio-Political Context

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CARIM-East Explanatory Note 13/06

Socio-Political Module

February 2013



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Agreements on readmission directly related to the issues of irregular / illegal¹ and return migration should be considered while placing the analytical focus on several aspects:

The first of these is *interstate*. It deals with the current state of affairs at the official (political) level and the prospects of concluding interstate agreements on readmission. Here, the focus is on how pressing those issues are in the context of political processes in present-day Azerbaijan.

The second is the *problem of irregular (illegal) migration* from Azerbaijan and associated problems of readmission and return migration.

Finally, *the third* is the *problem of irregular / illegal migration* to Azerbaijan.

1. Interstate relations

At present, there are no agreements on readmission between Azerbaijan and any other country. In April 2011, Arzu Rahimov, the then head of the State Migration Service, emphasized at a press conference: “We have our own position, and agreements will be concluded with certain countries when the time comes”². Negotiations between Azerbaijan and the EU on facilitation of the visa regime and readmission were launched in March 2012³. Deputy Foreign Minister Mahmud Mamedkuliev saw the start of official talks as a crucial step in cooperation with the EU⁴.

According to the most recent statements of Azerbaijan and the EU, talks will continue in the first quarter of 2013. Thus, according to Foreign Minister Elmar Mamedyarov, in December 2012, only a few issues regarding readmission of citizens from third countries were still unresolved. The Minister also emphasized: “We are trying to find a solution to these remaining issues. And I believe that the round of talks next year will be the final one”⁵. The head of the EU Delegation to Azerbaijan Roland Kobia does not believe the problem of visa regime facilitation to be irresolvable. According to him, the next round of talks will take place on March 12, 2013. Kobia also underlines that “the parties should make a greater effort working on readmission treaties”⁶.

Judging from the publications in the media, negotiations on these issues do not play a significant role in the political life of Azerbaijan⁷. Some experts publishing comments in the media point to the

¹ As for criteria of irregular migration, see: Christal Morehouse, M. Blomfield, *Irregular Migration in Europe* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2011): 4-5.

² *Azerbaijan does not have readmission agreements with any country – Arzu Rahimov*: <http://www.trend.az/news/politics/1858053.html>. Access date: 8.01.2013.

³ B. Safarov, “Azerbaijan-EU talks will continue next year”. Newspaper “*Echo*”, 8.11.2012.

⁴ *Azerbaijan and the EU started talks on visa regime facilitation*: <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/202200/>. Access date: 8.01.2013.

⁵ Elmar Mamedyarov “There is progress in the talks between Azerbaijan and the EU on visa regime facilitation”: <http://ru.apa.az/news/237384>. Access date: 29.01.2013.

⁶ Talks on visa regime facilitation between Azerbaijan and Europe are going on: <http://www.trend.az/regions/scaucasus/azerbaijan/2112777.html>. Access date: 29.01.2013; *There is progress on visa regime facilitation in Azerbaijan*: <http://kavkasia.net/Azerbaijan/2013/1358907469.php>. Access date: 29.01.2013.

⁷ Analysis of the popular Azeri mass media in 2012 (newspapers *Echo*, *Mirror*, news sites *Day.az*, *contact.az*) demonstrates that over the year of talks, around two dozen small articles and news reports covered visa regime facilitation and the readmission treaty between the EU and Azerbaijan. Neither the president, nor prominent opposition representatives touched upon the topic of these talks. In general the issue of visa regime modification attracts slightly more attention than the treaty on readmission. For instance, see: *There is a traditionally solid cooperation between Azerbaijan and the EU – Elmar Mamedyarov*: <http://www.1news.az/politics/20121217112945734.html>. Access date: 15.01.2012; R. Orudzhev “EU demonstrates readiness for rapprochement”. Newspaper *Mirror*, 17.12.2012: <http://www.zerkalo.az/2012/es->

fact that the issue of readmission agreements is important for the country, but public officials do not widely discuss it in the press⁸.

This state of affairs is caused by a number of factors. Unlike the stance adopted in neighboring Georgia, in Azerbaijan, key representatives of the political regime have underlined on numerous occasions that they are not in a hurry to get integrated into Europe and NATO⁹. The policy of sending students to study in the EU that is widely promoted in Azerbaijan is regulated by a number of agreements that are not directly contingent upon these talks¹⁰. The readmission agreement with the EU member states remains overshadowed by the talks on visa regime facilitation.

The possibility of a simplified visa application procedure is positively perceived both by public officials and by ordinary citizens of the country, despite the fact that this agreement is likely to directly touch upon a relatively small number of Azeri citizens¹¹. In general, the issues associated with the regulation of migration processes that used to involve the Azeri population in the post-Soviet period have lost urgency in recent times. The discourse about the need to bring back the citizens who had left the country due to economic difficulties was replaced by a discourse concerning the potential migration attractiveness of Azerbaijan. In this context, discussions about illegal migrants, including those who aspire to obtain asylum in the EU, gave way to discussions about the need to resolve the problem of migrants illegally staying in the territory of Azerbaijan¹². For instance, a well-known migration expert Azer Allakhveranov, who frequently comments upon readmission agreements and irregular migration in the mass media, argued in a 2007 interview that:

According to the data of international migration agencies, at present there are around 50 thousand Azeri in Western Europe, mostly staying there illegally. At some point, they applied for refugee status, but were denied this by migration institutions. They were supposed to leave Europe, but never did and simply changed their place of residence. It turns out that today these people cannot even come back to Azerbaijan because of the fear of being detained and deported. And they do not want to be deported, as in this case they will not be able to enter Europe for five years. <...> 50 thousand is a big figure, but Azeri public structures for some reason do not make statements in this regard and maintain silence¹³.

(Contd.) _____

demonstriruet-gotovnost-k-sblizheniyu/. Access date: 15.01.2013; B. Safarov, Ibid; T. Rafikoglu, N. Karu, "Azerbaijan does not plan to sign bilateral readmission treaties yet". Newspaper *Echo*, 8 June 2012.

⁸ See, for instance, T. Rafikoglu, N. Karu, Ibid.

⁹ See, for instance, *Azerbaijan does not intend to join the EU yet*: <http://www.trend.az/news/politics/2070094.html>. Access date: 15.01.2013; Zh. Mamedova, N. Abasov "On absence of the European option for Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Georgia". Newspaper *Echo*, No. 16 (2930), 16.01.2013.

President Ilham Aliyev often talks about successful partnership with NATO, but has never stated that Azerbaijan strives to become a full partner of the alliance in the future. See, for instance, *Ilham Aliyev and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen had a joint press conference*: <http://ru.president.az/articles/5845>. Access date: 15.01.2013.

¹⁰ According to the Azeri Ministry of Education, around five thousand students will undergo education in the EU, US, Japan etc. in 2007-2015 within the "State Program on young Azeri obtaining education abroad in 2007-2015": <http://www.edu.gov.az/view.php?lang=ru&menu=256>. Access date: 8 January 2013.

¹¹ The main flow of migrants from Azerbaijan travels to Russia and other CIS countries, as well as Turkey, rather than to EU member states. See: Romyantsev, *Labor migration and social inequality in post-Soviet Azerbaijan*. Available: <http://www.carim-east.eu/media/CARIM-East-2012-RU-15.pdf>. Access date: 15.01.2012; Romyantsev, *General trends of migration processes and policy in post-Soviet Azerbaijan (immigration and emigration)*: <http://www.carim-east.eu/media/exno/Explanatory%20Notes%20AZI%20corrected.pdf>. Access date: 15.01.2013.

¹² For more information on these modifications see: Romyansev S. (2010), "Post-Soviet Nation State as a Sponsor of Construction of the Ethno-National Diaspora: Azeri's Case", *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales (REMI)*, 2010 (26) No 3, pp. 111-131; S. Romyantsev (2011), "Time of diaspora: Nation state and policy of ethno-national society construction" in *State, Migration and Cultural Pluralism in Today's World. Materials of the international scientific conference*, Ed. by V.S. Malakhov, V.A. Tishkov, A.F. Yakovleva, Moscow: IKAR, p. 188-211.

¹³ Z. Babaeva. Azer Allakhveranov: "Today more than a million of our compatriots are outside Azerbaijan, and the conditions they live in are not paradise". Interview of Day.az with the head of the national resource center for migration issues: <http://news.day.az/society/74620.html>. Access date: 8.01.2013.

The statistical data given in this interview raise a number of questions, since accounting for such migrants is a difficult and imprecise task. It is more important to point out that several years later, Allakhveranov commented on readmission talks and focused mostly on problems that Azerbaijan faces, while references to irregular migration from Azerbaijan to the EU lost their urgency. Thus, according to Allakhveranov:

In 2011, around 2,000 Azeri citizens requested asylum in the EU member states. The dynamic of recent years and the comparison of figures that we get from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which is in charge of keeping records, gives us reason to conclude that the number of persons from Azerbaijan applying for asylum in the EU goes down with every year. Just 10 years ago, thousands of people filed such applications in the EU¹⁴.

These figures, and the problem of irregular migration (and, all the more so, the intention of many Azeri citizens to obtain refugee status) are not considered in the context of official policy. A number of experts believe that the position of Azeri authorities with regards to readmission is explained by the unwillingness of thousands of migrants to come back, as they might join the ranks of the unemployed¹⁵. At the official level, such suppositions are not voiced.

2. The problem of return and reintegration in Azerbaijan

There are no state programs of assistance for citizens returning to Azerbaijan. Furthermore, migrants who returned to their home country prefer not to talk much about their experiences and do not count on any assistance or participation in reintegration programs. Different opportunities are used for return and (re)integration. These are primarily far-reaching informal family, community and friend networks. Re-emigrants in Azerbaijan are usually not subject to any pressure from authorities, even if they made attempts to get political asylum and/or refugee status elsewhere. Many, while attempting to emigrate from the country, nevertheless retain property (apartments etc.). This also contributes to (re)integration after their return to Azerbaijan¹⁶.

One should note that, over the course of the last 2-3 years, the number of irregular migrants leaving Azerbaijan to the EU has been constantly decreasing¹⁷. In 2010 and 2011, Azerbaijan was not on the list of the 30 countries supplying the majority of migrants aspiring to receive asylum in the EU¹⁸. The economic growth observed in the country is only one of the reasons underlying explaining the decline in interest regarding migration to the EU. Rather, one should mention that most Azeri citizens who are ready to migrate and apply for asylum in the EU have already made such attempts. The tightening of rules and conditions of acquiring refugee status and asylum in the EU also plays an important role¹⁹.

¹⁴ T. Maksutov, N. Aliev, "Azeri citizens apply for asylum in the European Union less and less often". Newspaper *Echo*, No. 242 (2922), 31.12.2012.

¹⁵ See: *Europe is flooded by illegal Azerbaijani migrants*: <http://dailyaznews.wordpress.com/tag/%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD-%D0%BE-%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B8/>. Access date: 15.01.2013. About illegal migration to the EU countries see: Yunusov A. (2009), *Migration Processes in Azerbaijan*, Adiloglu: Baku, p. 169-171. For information on employment of the Azerbaijani population in the context of migration processes see: S. Rummyantsev (2012), *Labor migration*, Ibid..

¹⁶ The author conducted 32 interviews with re-emigrants in 2009-2012.

¹⁷ Yunusov, Ibid., 138-147; T. Maksutov, N. Aliev, Ibid.; Eurostat. Countries of origin of (non-EU-27) asylum seekers in the EU-27 Member States, 2010 and 2011 (1): http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php?title=File:Countries_of_origin_of_%28non-EU-27%29_asylum_seekers_in_the_EU-27_Member_States_2010_and_2011_%281%29.png&filetimestamp=20121012123304

¹⁸ Unlike neighboring Armenia and Georgia, which were numbers 13 and 14 respectively.

¹⁹ T. Maksutov, N. Aliev, Ibid.

A certain share of irregular migrants (who did not acquire asylum in the EU) often leave again for the same countries after having been deported home. The same can be said about irregular migration in the CIS space²⁰.

3. Irregular migration in Azerbaijan

In the context of the official discourse, irregular migration to Azerbaijan becomes a more and more pressing problem with every year²¹. There are no trustworthy statistics regarding the number of such migrants on the territory of Azerbaijan. According to the latest official data of the State Migration Service, in November 2012 only 6,276 applications were filed to extend permits of temporary stay in the territory of Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, 1,520 foreigners were instructed to leave the country within 48 hours. 119 foreigners were expelled from Azeri territory²². As for migrants in Azerbaijan, the main official policy (action plan) is to exercise control over them²³. There are no working programs of migrant integration.

Main conclusions

By and large, the regulation of migration processes is reduced to the construction of the discourse about the attractiveness of Azerbaijan and the exercise of control over migrants. The conclusion of readmission agreements, as well as (re)integration and assistance to returning migrants are not seen as pressing issues. One can also argue that the number of irregular migrants from Azerbaijan exceeds the number of illegal migrants arriving in the country. As a result, readmission agreements can be considered an uncomfortable issue for Azerbaijan.

²⁰ In July-August 2012 in Baku, the author conducted 6 interviews with migrants from Azerbaijan to Russia who have such experiences.

²¹ Rummyantsev, Ibid.; S. Rummyantsev (2012), *General trends of migration processes and policy in post-Soviet Azerbaijan (immigration and emigration)*: <http://www.carim-east.eu/database/socio-political-module/?ss=1&country=Azerbaijan&lang=ru>. Access date: 15.01.2013.

²² *Official statistical information of the Azerbaijani State Migration Service for November 2012*: <http://migration.gov.az/index.php?section=009&subsection=041&lang=ru&pageid=4157>. Access date: 8.01.2013.

²³ See: S. Rummyantsev, *Labor migration*, Ibid.; Rummyantsev, *General trends of migration processes and policy in post-Soviet Azerbaijan (immigration and emigration)*; S. Rummyantsev (2012), *A new immigration policy in Azerbaijan*: <http://www.carim-east.eu/media/exno/Explanatory%20Notes%20AZ1%20corrected.pdf>. Access date: 15.01.2013.

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