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# ***Refugees and Forced Migrants in Azerbaijan: the Political Context***

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In Azerbaijan, the end of the 1980s-the first half of the 1990s were marked by a massive forced displacement of the population. The chief cause was the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee their permanent place of residence.<sup>1</sup> By the summer of 1989, practically all ethnic Azeris and Muslim Kurds were deported from the Armenian territory of the Soviet Union. The majority of them ended up in Azerbaijan as refugees. At the end of the 1980s, the Meskhetian Turks from the Central Asian region also arrived as refugees. “According to data provided by the Azeri government [in 1996], 196,845 of refugees were ethnic Azeris and 51,649 were Meskhetian Turks from Uzbekistan.”<sup>2</sup> In this case, this data refers only to one version of statistics of refugees from Armenia. According to another possible version: “in 1988-1989, the official statistics recorded 219,776 people who came to Azerbaijan from the neighboring republics.”<sup>3</sup> The difference in the figures is due not so much to the difficulties in the accounting, as to the fact that the statistics of the numbers of refugees from Armenia is a political question. Either way, in the majority of statements by the Azeri politicians or publications in the Azeri media, the number of refugees varies between 200 and 250 thousand people.

The absolute majority of ethnic Armenians residing outside the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region were in turn deported from the Azerbaijan SSR. According to the last Soviet census, in 1989, approximately 390,500 Armenians lived in Azerbaijan. Per the first census conducted in independent Azerbaijan in 1999, 120,700 ethnic Armenians were citizens of the country. According to the last census conducted in the country in 2009, 120,300 Armenians were living in the Republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>4</sup> Thus, based on the figures of the last three censuses, by 1990, approximately 270 thousand ethnic Armenians had become refugees from Azerbaijan. As for Armenians included into the composition of the country’s population, there is a rough estimate of the number of Armenians in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, based on the data from the 1989 census. In fact, this region is not managed by the Azeri authorities, and census workers did not have access in the Karabakh region. It should also be noted that a number of statements by the Azeri politicians mention that there are up to 30 thousand ethnic Armenians residing in Azerbaijan. One of the most recent statements of this kind was made in September 2013 in connection with a report on the status of human rights and freedom of speech, prepared by the international organization Human Rights Watch.<sup>5</sup> In opposition to the authors of this critical report, the head of the Office of Political Analysis and Information in the Office of the President of Azerbaijan Elnur Aslanov claimed that:

“The report’s claims about the prevalence of “Armenophobia” in Azerbaijan are absurd. They are a product of sick imagination. While not a single Azeri remained in Armenia today, not counting our prisoners, over 30 thousand people of Armenian descent reside in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the Azeri government considers the Armenian community of Nagorno-Karabakh to be citizens of Azerbaijan, and in the post-conflict period the Azeri community will continue to live together with them.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, in the content of political discourse, constructed in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a significant role is attributed to the number of ethnic Armenians residing in Azerbaijan outside the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The figure of 30 thousand people does is not backed up by

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<sup>1</sup> See: Waal-de T. (2003), *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*. New York: New York University Press; Cornell S. E. (2011), *Azerbaijan since Independence*, New York: M. E. Sharpe, p. 126-161.

<sup>2</sup> World Refugee survey 1997, Committee of Refugee, p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Guseinova, I (2001), Refugees, their Status and Role in Modern Azeri Society in: D.E. Furman, eds., *Azerbaijan and Russia: Society and Government*, Moscow: The Summer Garden, p 323-336. Downloaded from [http://old.sakharov-center.ru/publications/azrus/az\\_011.htm](http://old.sakharov-center.ru/publications/azrus/az_011.htm), on September 12, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Population by ethnic groups, by native language and freely command of languages. Доступно по адресу <http://www.stat.gov.az/source/demography/indexen.php> дата доступа 15 сентября 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Tightening the Screws: Azerbaijan’s Crackdown on Civil Society and Dissent, 2013, USA: Human Rights Watch.

<sup>6</sup> The Office of the President of Azerbaijan responded to accusations by Human Rights Watch. Downloaded from <http://www.br.az/politics/20130904110206784.html#page999>, on September 16, 2013.

the official statistics. In this case, it is a populist statement that is put forward by the Azeri authorities in the context of an essentialist discourse about the “genetic tolerance” of the Azeris. . Either way, these and similar political statements shed doubt on the declared number of Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan.

During various years in the post-Soviet period the mass of refugees was also replenished by the ethnic Chechens. According to Dede Lei of UNHCR, the UN agency for Refugee Affairs in Azerbaijan, in March of 2000 his organization provided assistance to 450 families. “The total number of this category of refugees registered was 5,400 people.”<sup>7</sup> The number of the Chechen refugees was constantly changing, and it is not possible to state the exact number.<sup>8</sup> Many Chechens see Azerbaijan as a transit point on the way to EU countries, the US, or Canada. From a political context, the Chechen refugee problem was related to specific relations between Russia and Azerbaijan. After Vladimir Putin came to power and gradually improved the relationship between Russia and Azerbaijan, the problem has quickly lost its urgency. In the 2000s, the Azeri government deported refugees to Russia several times, which caused discontent amongst the ethnic Chechens residing in the country.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, in the opinion of some international organizations staff,<sup>10</sup> there has been a sharp decrease in their numbers in recent years.

The political relevance of the problems of the Chechen refugees - as they are considerably less significant in number and are practically imperceptible in the political context of refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, and some other countries - cannot be compared with those of the Azeri refugees . In the context of political and politicized statistical discourse, Azeri refugees from Armenia are most often combined with the IDPs. The latter are understood as persons who had been forced to leave their homes during various kinds of clashes and armed conflict in 1990-1994. The absolute majority of IDPs are ethnic Azeris,<sup>11</sup> residents of Nagorno-Karabakh (mostly from the Shushinskiy region) and several regions adjacent to this area (Lachinskiy, Kelbajarskiy, Ardamskiy, etc.), which are occupied by the Armenian armed forces. According to Iranda Guseinova:

“Today the international community claims that there are one million refugees and migrants in Azerbaijan. The president, the members of the administration, as well as the politicians, the members of the national parliament and some media repeat this figure all the time. Thus, the official data do not differentiate “refugees” from Armenia and “IDPs” from Karabakh and other adjacent regions [...] But even if one adds the number of refugees from Armenia and the number of IDPs, it still seems that one million is an exaggerated figure. According to the latest official statistics, the number of IDPs and refugees can be calculated at 568,989 persons and 219,776, respectively, in total, 788,765 people, but not one million.”<sup>12</sup>

Everyday problems of refugees and IDPs have been to a large extent similar (the lack of permanent housing, difficulty in finding employment etc.) These problems were exacerbated by the stagnation of the economy in the 1990s, which occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The main distinction between these two categories of Azeri citizens, which becomes significant in the context of political discourse, is a different understanding of their possible future. A widespread policy is such that the

<sup>7</sup> Lynch D. (2002), *Separatist States and Post-Soviet Conflicts*, International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs), Vol. 78, No. 4, p. 831-848, pp. 835.

<sup>8</sup> All kind of figures have been in the media. For instance, the number of refugees from Chechnya analysts’ new site “Caucasian Knot” was estimated to be 10 thousand people in 2008. See: *Refugees from Chechnya want to Leave Azerbaijan*. Downloaded from <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/138178>, 10.09.2013 on September 16, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance: *Refugees from Chechnya are Not Satisfied with Life in Azerbaijan*. Downloaded from <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/116600/> on 11.09.2013; *In Azerbaijan Refugees from Chechnya Have Declared a Violation of Rights*. Downloaded from <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/149739> on September 11, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> With whom the author was able to speak with in August 2013 in Azerbaijan.

<sup>11</sup> Ethnic Kurds and Russians were also included among the IDPs.

<sup>12</sup> Guseinova, I., *ibid*.

return of the IDPs to the place of their former residence should be considered a mandatory condition for the conclusion of a peace treaty, and, at the same time, a discussion of a possible return of refugees (Azeris to Armenia and Armenians to Azerbaijan) is in fact more declarative in nature.

The number of refugees and IDPs is impressive relative to the general population of the country.<sup>13</sup> Refugees and IDPs have an essential role in the political discourse, constructed around conflict. The present situation is linked to a number of factors: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to date has not been solved, and prospects for international regulation remain slim; after 1994, the revanchist mood gradually strengthened in Azerbaijan; in the 2000s, the level of militarization has been quickly growing in the country; and, finally, country authorities at the very highest level are constantly using the rhetoric of war and threat to resolve the conflict by force.<sup>14</sup> It is in this context that one needs to consider the politicization of refugee statistics. The more people that can be placed into this category, the more convincing the position of the Azeri authorities becomes. The most popular figure, as discussed earlier, is one million. But this is not the limit. In June 2013, Ali Hasanov, the Deputy Prime Minister and Chairman of the State Committee on Refugee Affairs and IDPs, stated in his interview that:

“Increasing by 10 thousand people every year, the figure has reached one million 200 thousand. This means that 1.2 million people – out of 9 million population—are refugees and IDPs. That is to say, if one out of every 135 persons around the world is a refugee, in Azerbaijan, every 8<sup>th</sup> person is a refugee. Our problem is very difficult.”<sup>15</sup>

Thus, on the one hand, in the context of the permanent political conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, the problem with refugees and IDPs is represented as no less permanent and resolvable only in parallel with the conflict. On the other hand, this same problem can be considered a resource for the construction of a positive political image for the governing regime. The President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, often claims in his statements that the authorities successfully resolve the problems of this category of citizens. In April 2013, during the meetings with the IDPs, the President stated that:

“the persons responsible for questions related to refugees unequivocally say that this issue is dealt with at the very highest level in Azerbaijan. Many countries in the world have problems related to refugee and IDP. However, the most successful method of dealing with these issues has been found in Azerbaijan. You see, in the world—in the Near East, in other places—IDPs face big problems. Now hundreds of thousands of people have become IDPs. This kind of thoughtful resolution of this issue in Azerbaijan paves the way for these countries as well.”<sup>16</sup>

Another important aspect of the politicization of the problem of refugees and IDPs is related to the increasing criticism in recent years of the Azeri regime for its autocratic character. In the context of this criticism, the regime as a rule uses the situation with refugees and IDPs as a counter argument with the goal of, for instance, discrediting various international human rights organizations in the eyes of the citizens. For instance, Elnur Aslanov states:

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<sup>13</sup> To understand the scale of what has happened, one can compare the number of refugees and IDPs in various European countries. In 1996, there were 2,479,000 refugees registered in European territory, i.e., approximately every tenth of them was from Azerbaijan. Furthermore, in terms of number of refugees, the Republic of Azerbaijan ranked 4<sup>th</sup> place in Europe. More refugees were found only in Germany- 436,400, Russia- 484,000, and Yugoslavia- 550,000 people. World Refugee Survey 1997, Committee of Refugees, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Waal-de T. (2009), *The Karabakh Trap: Dangers and Dilemmas of the Nagorny Karabakh Conflict // Conciliations Resources*. London.

<sup>15</sup> *In Azerbaijan there are one million two thousand refugees and IDPs*. Downloaded from <http://www.1news.az/society/20130620045702036.html>, data доступа on September 15, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Ilham Aliyev: Given that the population in the country is mostly refugees and IDPs in Azerbaijan. Downloaded from [http://www.aze.az/news\\_ilxam\\_aliev\\_s\\_89874.html](http://www.aze.az/news_ilxam_aliev_s_89874.html) on September 16, 2013.

“Why does the organization [Human Rights Watch] remain silent about over one million refugees and IDPs, whose rights and freedoms have been violated, without bringing the attention of the international community to this issue?!”<sup>17</sup>

Novruz Mamedov, Chief Deputy of the Office of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, who heads the Department of Foreign Relations, emphasized that:

“Had during the 20 years of its existence the Human Rights Watch organization produced at least one fair report about the violation of rights of more than one million of Azeri citizens who have become refugees and IDPs as a result of the Armenian aggression, then one could believe in the impartiality of this structure. But, unfortunately, this is not the case. Such organizations always act following someone else’s instructions.”<sup>18</sup>

### *Conclusions and Recommendations*

In the context of a conflict discourse, the factor of the existence of refugees and IDPs in the country becomes an important political resource. The authorities and the opposition actively use this factor in political fights and to strengthen their own positions. As a certain homogenous group, refugees and IDPs do not exist outside of the political discourse. Over the past 20 years, the refugee population has become strongly differentiated.

A full resolution of issues related to this category of persons, and their de-politicization, is possible only in a situation of a lesser relevance of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In the present-day situation, possible approaches that would help to successfully resolve the problems related to this category of persons and, at the same time, would become real steps in the direction of world regulation of the conflict, can be identified as the following:

- It is necessary to stop mythologizing the stories of refugees and IDPs. Economic and discursive resources should be directed towards the resolution of their problems, and not to the construction of some homogenous group, whose existence becomes a resource for further militarization of the country and the preservation of an autocratic style of governance.
- It is necessary to more actively create initiative groups composed of refugees and IDPs themselves, who could take an active part in the shaping of public policy relating to these groups of population.
- Finally, in terms of a real step that is necessary to solve the conflict (and, accordingly, resolve problems of refugee and IDPs), it must be pointed that it is necessary to break out of the deadlock on the issue of compensation payments to ethnic Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan and to the Azeri from Armenia.

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<sup>17</sup> Office of the President of Azerbaijan...ibid.

<sup>18</sup> The Human Rights Watch report on Azerbaijan is unobjective and prejudiced. Downloaded from <http://www.1news.az/politics/20130905040057280.html> дата доступа, September 16th, 2013.