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From war zones to waiting lines

A year after the Karabakh exodus, refugees in Armenia remain in limbo, struggling with housing, citizenship issues and limited international support

A year has passed since the ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh. In September 2023, after nine months of blockade, Azerbaijan launched a military operation in the region, as a result of which almost its entire population, more than 100 000 people, were forced to leave their homes and seek refuge on the territory of Armenia.

Throughout this year, solving the problems of the Karabakh refugees and their full integration into their new environment have remained a priority for Armenian society and the state. But it was clear from the outset that for a country with a population of three million people, accepting and settling that many refugees is an extremely difficult task. By comparison, the quota for refugee admissions in the United States for the current fiscal year is set at 125 000.

While the Armenian government has managed to address the short-term problems of forcibly displaced persons by providing monthly allowances that help refugees address high rental prices, serious difficulties are already evident in their long-term integration.

Reasons for the difficult integration

The failings of the Armenian government in the long-term integration of Karabakh refugees can be traced back to these interim indicators: the number of refugees who left the country permanently, the number of citizenship applications submitted and the number of families benefiting from the housing support programme.

Over the past year, about 12 000 Karabakh refugees have left Armenia, which is more than 10 per cent of all forcibly displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh. The main reasons for this exodus were high housing prices and lack of employment, again indicating the ineffectiveness of the integration policy.

Another alarming indicator is the low number of applications for Armenian citizenship, only 4 300 people — a consequence of the October 2023 government decision, which declared all Karabakh refugees as persons under temporary protection. As a result of this decision, passports with code 070, previously issued to Karabakh Armenians, were recognised only as travel documents. Thus, about 150 000 people were effectively deprived of their citizenship, despite having previously possessed all the rights of Armenian citizens.

After a few months, a bitter joke began to circulate among the Karabakh refugees: they had escaped the bread queues of the blockade only to end up in the passport queues in Yerevan.

Many holders of such passports worked in the state system and held high state positions, including after the Second Karabakh War in 2020. The Armenian government justified its decision on the basis of a desire to protect refugees and attract international support, but in practice, this has benefited neither the state nor the refugees themselves, and has only created additional difficulties.

With the temporary protection, a ban on leaving the country was also introduced for those who had not received a temporary protection certificate. But the process of obtaining this document became complicated due to the large number of applicants and the inability of the state apparatus to process the data in the shortest possible time. After a few months, a bitter joke began to circulate among Karabakh refugees: they had escaped the bread queues of the blockade only to end up in the passport queues in Yerevan.

At this stage, the temporary protection document has no practical significance and is used by refugees only when crossing the border. Only the Armenian border guards are aware of its existence.

The above-mentioned decision has also severely limited the possibilities for refugees to obtain foreign visas. Some Western embassies, citing the government's position, refuse to consider visa applications from holders of passports with code 070, as they are not recognised as passports of the Republic of Armenia.

All these government decisions partly explain the lack of enthusiasm among Karabakh refugees to obtain new Armenian passports. Another reason may be the refugees' fear of losing their collective and other rights if they refuse passports with a 'Karabakh' code. The lack of effective communication on these issues on the part of the government only contributes to such fears.

An inadequate housing programme

A third indicator of the ineffectiveness of the refugee integration policy is the housing programme. This programme, adopted by the government in May 2024, envisages the issuance of special certificates in the amount of three to five million AMD (about $7 500 -12 500) for each refugee. The amount of the certificate depends on the settlement where the purchase of housing is planned: the closer the settlement is to Yerevan, the lower the nominal value of the certificate.

According to the latest data, 928 refugees have applied for certificates, of which 23 have been approved so far. These low numbers can be explained by several factors. In practice, only three categories of citizens can benefit from the programme: families willing to purchase housing in the border regions of the country where the cost of real estate is lower and the face value of the certificate is higher; large families who can collect a larger number of certificates; and refugees who have the creditworthiness to use the certificates to obtain a mortgage loan for the purchase of housing.

Adding to the shortcomings and mistakes of the Armenian government is the very limited support of international actors in addressing this humanitarian catastrophe.

The acquisition of housing in the border regions is further complicated by the fact that most of the jobs in the country are concentrated in and around Yerevan. Accordingly, most refugees prefer to settle in this part of Armenia.

It is also quite obvious that the number of creditworthy people among refugees is limited. According to the latest data, 18 946 refugees have been employed over the last year, of which only a part may be able to obtain a mortgage loan.

Adding to the shortcomings and mistakes of the Armenian government is the very limited support of international actors in addressing this humanitarian catastrophe. As of June 2024, Armenia has received $109 million in aid from international partners to support the needs of Karabakh refugees. It is important to note that a significant portion of this amount represents commitments rather than actual funds received. By comparison, the aid package to Georgia after the August 2008 war totalled $4.5 billion.

The share of the US and the EU is about $30 million. Given their active participation in the negotiation process that culminated in the ethnic

cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as statements by US officials on the eve of the Azerbaijani military operation that the US would not allow an attack on the Karabakh people, Washington and Brussels bear significant responsibility for the fate of the Karabakh refugees. One must also note that the disappointing amount of international aid is also the result of the Armenian government's omissions and ineffective work.

Armenia will not be able to meet these challenges alone in the absence of significant international assistance.

Lastly, it should be emphasised that the solutions to all the above-mentioned problems are interrelated. In order to increase the effectiveness of the housing programme, it is necessary to actively work on improving the skills and retraining of refugees, create new jobs and support people who are eager to start their own businesses. Addressing these challenges will lead to a significant increase in the ability to pay among refugees and an activation of the certificate programme. This, in turn, will increase the number of applications for Armenian citizenship, as only refugees who are Armenian citizens can benefit from this programme. Addressing these problems will also help reduce the rate of refugee outflow from the country.

It is clear, however, that Armenia will not be able to meet these challenges alone in the absence of significant international assistance. Much will depend on the extent of Western assistance to Armenia in the process of addressing these long-term problems.



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