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Internal Displacement in the South Caucasus: Why Has Vulnerability Increased in the COVID-19 Pandemic?

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Abstract

All three countries of the South Caucasus have been confronted with war and forced displacement over the past three decades. Because of the unresolved nature of the internal conflicts, internally displaced persons (IDPs) cannot return to their homes and remain in a situation of protracted displacement. This article investigates the socio-economic situation of the internally displaced populations in the South Caucasus, with a special focus on their vulnerability to the impact of COVID-19. Poverty, unemployment, poor housing conditions as well as limited access to education and health care have resulted in increased vulnerabilities of IDPs, which have been further aggravated by the measures imposed to contain COVID-19. As a result, despite aid programmes targeting the specific needs of the displaced populations, their social isolation has increased over the course of the pandemic.

Introduction

The South Caucasus region has experienced three major ethno-political conflicts which resulted in large-scale displacement. Due to ethnic mobilization, political confrontation and violent conflict since the late 1980s, more than one million people in the region have lost their homes. The displaced populations are regarded as internally displaced persons (IDPs), as they did not cross an internationally recognized border and thus do not fall under the 1951 Geneva Convention. Data on internal displacement in the South Caucasus is often inaccurate and at times contradictory, as state services for IDPs are poorly funded and registration incomplete. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, there are at present about 735,000 IDPs in Azerbaijan, 304,000 IDPs in Georgia, and up to 2,700 IDPs¹ in Armenia (IDMC 2022). The situation of the internally displaced populations is a contested political issue in the South Caucasus, as it relates both to human rights and social justice. As the conflicts over Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain unresolved, the displaced cannot return and remain in protracted displacement.

This article discusses the situation of the IDP populations in the South Caucasus on the basis of the concept of vulnerability. It thus asks what the specific humanitarian needs of IDPs are and how state actors and international humanitarian aid organizations have responded to these needs. The analysis traces the different waves of internal displacement in the South Cauca-

sus and specifically looks into the policy fields of housing, health and education. Two main research questions are addressed: (1) what are the specific sources of vulnerability among the internally displaced population, and (2) what strategies have governments employed and how can their policies be assessed against the background of international agreements such as the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement? Special attention is paid to the current socio-economic condition of the displaced communities and the interrelation between their specific vulnerabilities and the social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unresolved Conflicts and Internal Displacement

In the last phase of the Soviet Union, three ethno-political conflicts emerged in the South Caucasus: the conflicts over Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. All three conflicts have led to the forced displacement of large population groups. The conflicts remain unresolved to this day, and the governments of the unrecognized republics decline the return of the displaced populations, leaving them in a state of protracted displacement. Protracted displacement describes a situation of increased vulnerability, lasting for many years or sometimes even decades, during which the displaced remain dependent on external humanitarian aid (Kälin & Chapuisat 2018).

In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, about 600,000 ethnic Azeri fled the areas that came under Armenian

1 In addition to the 2,700 Armenian IDPs who were displaced in the 1990s, the country has 31,299 persons in a refugee-like situation at the end of 2021, the majority of whom (26,725) have been displaced in the 2020 second Nagorno-Karabakh war and currently reside on the territory of Armenia (UNHCR, n.d.). These newly displaced are sometimes referred to as IDPs and sometimes as "persons in a refugee-like situation" (UNHCR, n.d.).

control in the 1992–1994 war (Kjaernet 2010).² Azerbaijan thus has one of the largest IPD population worldwide, equaling 7 % of the total population (ICC 2012). The conflict also resulted in forced displacement among ethnic Armenians, albeit to a lesser extent: about 65,000 Armenians fled their homes during the 1992–1994 war, several thousand of whom were not able to return after the war (IDMC 2010), mostly because of lack of funding (Cohen, 2006).

The violent escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020 has led to a new wave of displacement, mostly on the Armenian side (ICRC 2022). In this second Nagorno-Karabakh war, which lasted from September to November 2020, about 100,000 civilians were displaced (UN 2020). The new war particularly affected the southern part of the self-proclaimed republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. About 70,000–75,000 people, half the region's population and 90 per cent of its women and children, fled their homes in 2020 (ICC 2020). As of May 2021, about 37,000 still reside in Armenia in desperate conditions (UNSDG 2021). Many of these new Armenian IDPs will likely not be able to return, as settlements have been destroyed and territories have come under Azeri military control. The government of Azerbaijan, in turn, has announced that it plans to repatriate Azeri IDPs to Nagorno-Karabakh (Interfax 2021). On both sides of the conflict, the future prospects for the displaced populations remain unclear to date.

In Georgia, more than 250,000 ethnic Georgians were forced to leave their homes as a result of the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict in September 1993. In addition, about 30,000 ethnic Georgians fled the South Ossetia region due to fighting and general insecurity in the early 1990s. The Russian–Georgian War in August 2008 resulted in a second wave of displacement in Georgia: about 157,000 people were displaced, of which about 30,000 have been permanently displaced (UNHCR 2009, 7). Overall, IDPs represent 6 % of the Georgian population (UNHCR 2009).

In addition to conflict-induced displacement, all three countries of the South Caucasus also have smaller populations of environmental IDPs who were forced to leave their homes as a result of natural disasters, including flooding and landslides. In Georgia, for example, there were about 18,000 environmental IDPs (or eco-migrants) as of 2017 (OHCHR n.d.).

IDP Vulnerability

The concept of vulnerability describes the susceptibility to external hazards within specific population groups. It can be defined as “the conditions determined by physical, social economic and environmental factors or processes,

which increase the susceptibility of a community to the impact of hazards” (UNDRR 2004, 16). The concept is helpful for understanding the differential risk factors in a population. Internally displaced populations constitute a particularly vulnerable group in many countries. In a situation of protracted displacement, IDPs are “prevented from taking, or are unable to take, steps that allow them to progressively reduce the vulnerability, impoverishment, and marginalization they face as displaced people” (Kälin & Chapuisat 2018, 251).

In the South Caucasus, the main concerns of IDP vulnerability include poverty, unemployment, and poor housing conditions as well as limited access to education and health care. Throughout the region, IDPs are more likely to be affected by poverty than the general population. In Azerbaijan, family incomes of displaced families have been found to be significantly lower than those in the local population (Kjaernet 2010). Although the government of Azerbaijan has made use of the State Oil Fund to improve the living conditions for the displaced population, two decades after the original conflict more than 90,000 Azeri IDPs remained in camps or settlements. A substantial proportion of this population exists at below-subsistence levels, without adequate food, education, sanitation and medical care (Kjaernet 2010), a situation that has not changed much over the past ten years (UNHCR 2020). In Georgia, the majority of IDPs live below the poverty line, their main income being financial assistance issued by the Social Service Agency of Georgia (IOM 2020). In both countries, the state allowance paid to all registered IDPs is too low to cover basic needs (Azernews 2017, IOM 2020) and had thus been described as a “bread money” (Kjaernet 2010, 66).

The lack of adequate income sources is closely linked to the limited socio-economic integration of the displaced population. In both Azerbaijan and Georgia, levels of unemployment are significantly higher among IDPs than in the general population (Kjaernet 2010, Najafzadeh 2013). Many settlements are located in isolated areas, which makes it difficult for IDPs to find employment (Kjaernet 2010). In their new places of living, many IDPs could only find lower-skilled employment (Najafzadeh 2013). A lack of social capital also plays a role. Many IDPs lack a social network to help them locate job openings (Kjaernet 2010). In Georgia, IDPs often rely on subsistence farming or work as seasonal workers (Chibchiuri 2020).

Poor housing conditions are a key concern for the displaced populations in the South Caucasus. Even nearly thirty years after the war, the majority of IDPs in the region remain in separate IDP settlement and collective

2 The current number of IDPs in Azerbaijan is higher: 735,000 in 2022 (IDMC 2022). This is due to the fact that the IDP status is inheritable.

centers (Najafzadeh 2013). Many of these settlements are overcrowded and do not have adequate water and sanitation (UNDP 2021). The situation in non-approved or informal IDP centers is especially difficult, as buildings often do not have access to electricity or water. In 2018, about 30 percent of Georgian IDPs were living in perilous conditions (OHCHR 2018). In Armenia, the government launched a program for IDPs in 2019, but this has not yet improved the housing situation, as IDPs continue to be unable to find new accommodation and still struggle with bureaucratic hurdles (Ghazaryan 2020).

Furthermore, the isolated housing creates a situation of social segregation, as well as causing difficulties in accessing basic social services: in Georgia, many IDP camps and settlements are situated in the countryside, far away from essential services (Chibchiuri 2020). This also has a negative impact on the prospects of education — many displaced children in the South Caucasus suffer restrictions in their access to school (ICRC 2021).

The Limits of Humanitarian Aid

Because IDPs reside within their own countries, the primary responsibility for their assistance rests with the national authorities (Cohen 2006). The governments of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia have acknowledged this responsibility and issued laws that guarantee the rights of the displaced populations. However, in all three countries, the implementation does not meet the legal requirements. As a result, government policies fail to address IDP vulnerability and guarantee their civic and social rights. The politicization of displacement increases the social isolation of the IDPs. Because state actors insist on the return of the IDPs, they neglect steps that are necessary for their social integration into their new communities (Kjaernet 2010). As a result, most IDPs in the South Caucasus remain in limbo, with little chance of either return or integration.

Humanitarian aid agencies have assisted the governments of the South Caucasus in responding to IDP needs. They base their assistance on the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which state that IDPs are entitled to enjoy, without discrimination, the same rights and freedoms as the general population (UNHCR, Guiding Principles 2004). Humanitarian aid agencies emphasize the need to improve the social conditions for the displaced populations and strengthen their opportunities for socio-economic integration (Cohen 2006). Many aid programs in the South Caucasus focus on improving living conditions, creating jobs and other income-earning opportunities (Iluridze 2021). Still, donor efforts are not able to meet all needs, as a recent study on the implementation of international aid programs for IDPs in Georgia shows (Funke 2022).

Conclusions: Why Are IDPs Particularly Vulnerable to COVID-19?

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities among the displaced populations in the South Caucasus. In Azerbaijan and Georgia, a majority of IDPs still live in substandard collective centers and IDP settlements (Chibchiuri 2020; Ghazaryan 2020). Because of overcrowding and poor sanitary conditions, IDPs have poor protection against infections such as COVID-19. Although there is no data showing differences in infection rates, several sources have pointed to higher risk factors among the displaced populations in the South Caucasus (Chibchiuri 2020; Iluridze 2021). A report by the Public Defender of Georgia concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened the barriers to equality in health care for conflict-affected women and girls (Iluridze 2021).

However, IDPs have also been suffering the consequences of government measures to contain the pandemic, which have severely increased their social isolation (Chibchiuri 2020). The hardest hit were the residents of IDP settlements far from the cities. In Georgia, the government declared a state of emergency in March 2020, which restricted local public transport. As a result, many IDPs were unable to reach their workplace or the land allocated to them for subsistence farming. Although the government assured that IDPs were allowed to travel with special passes, many Georgian IDPs complained that their lives have been made particularly difficult by the travel restrictions (Chibchiuri 2020).

Moreover, even more importantly, due to the measures introduced to contain the pandemic, many Georgian IDPs have faced difficulties in accessing basic services, including food supply and health care. Especially in settlements near the administrative dividing line and in collective centers, IDPs reported that they could not reach grocery stores, pharmacies or medical doctors (Chibchiuri 2020). Because of the temporary closure of public transport in 2020, children from IDP settlements could not attend school. These educational problems were aggravated by the poor internet connection in most IDP settlements, which hampered school attendance during lockdown (Chibchiuri 2020). Displaced children were not able to do their homework and fell behind in school. Moreover, students from IDP families boarding in other cities had to return to their families as staying on their own was not feasible during lockdown and thus had to discontinue their study programmes (Chibchiuri 2020).

As well as causing practical access problems, the pandemic has also affected IDPs' mental health by re-awakening the trauma of the violent conflict they endured. Moreover, many IDPs have reported that existing stigma and discrimination intensified during the last two years

(Iluridze 2021). A report on the situation of war-affected women and girls in Georgia concluded that government COVID-19 measures did not sufficiently consider female vulnerability, which further fuels the spread of infections within the displaced communities (Iluridze 2021). According to the report, “stigma forced women to hide or not reveal their infection status and not apply to testing and health facilities” (Iluridze 2021, 3).

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the complex vulnerabilities of the displaced populations in the South Caucasus. Aid agencies focused on strengthening resilience through improving livelihood conditions and strengthening work integration (Chibchiuri 2020, Iluridze 2021). However, despite these efforts, the social isolation of IDPs has only increased in the course of the pandemic.

Lessons Learnt

Given the inadequacy of current aid programmes, what can humanitarian aid agencies do to better respond to the specific vulnerabilities of IDPs in the South Caucasus? First, in cooperation with national governments, aid agencies should improve data availability on internal displacement and strengthen the mapping of IDP

needs. At present, information often remains incomplete. This is especially apparent in the case of the Armenian IDPs who were displaced during the second Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020. Although being a situation of large-scale displacement, the war has been underreported, and the resulting IDPs still remain in dire conditions (UNSDG 2021). Second, to effectively assist IDPs, agencies need to consider the intersections of age and gender. Often the most vulnerable persons among the displaced are the elderly or families headed by single mothers (Iluridze, 2021).

Third and most importantly, programs for IDPs need to be mainstreamed in general health and poverty reduction programs. This requires cooperation with state agencies. At present, the specific needs of the displaced populations are often overlooked in state programs. For example, when the government of Georgia announced its COVID-19 crisis plan in April 2020, it did not specifically mention IDPs (Chibchiuri 2020). In order to improve assistance to the most vulnerable population groups, aid agencies thus need to ensure that their needs are included in general health and poverty reduction programs.

About the Author

Ulla Pape is a post-doctoral researcher at Otto Suhr Institute of Political Science at Freie Universität Berlin. Her main research interests include social policy, health, and civil society development in the post-Soviet space. She has published a book called “The Politics of HIV/AIDS in Russia” (Routledge 2014) and articles in journals such as *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Voluntas*, and the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*.

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