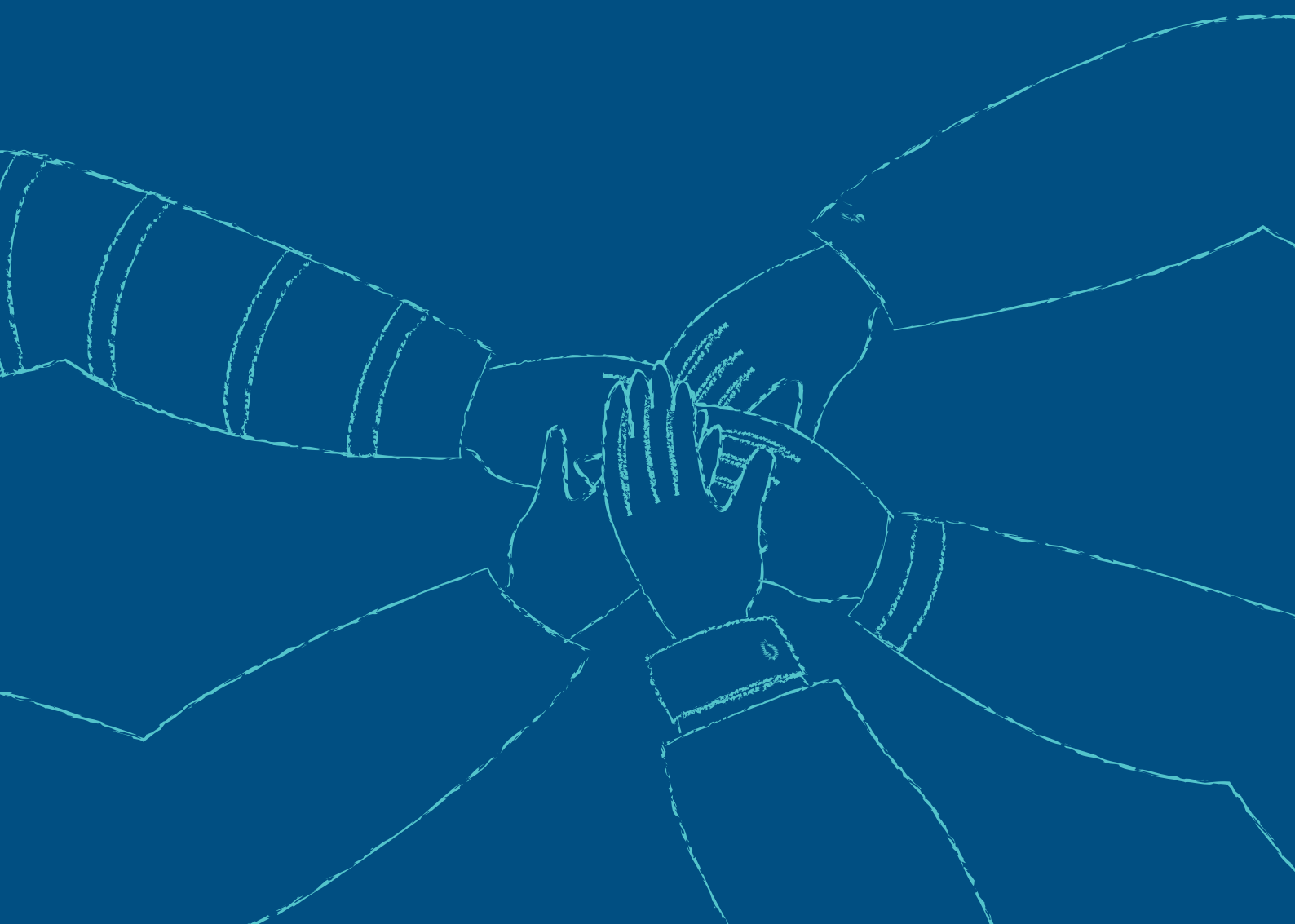


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INTEGRATION OF DISPLACED ARMENIANS FROM NAGORNO-KARABAKH: CHANCES AND CHALLENGES

(September 2023 – March 2025)



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Abstract

The following paper describes the current situation (Stand: March 2025) of forcibly displaced Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, almost 1.5 years after experiencing most disastrous ethnic cleansing in Armenian history since the pogroms of Sumgait and Baku between 1988-1990. It analyzes their rescue-arrival and new life in the Republic of Armenia and evaluates the process of their integration in this new context from different perspectives. As a multidisciplinary study, it may be useful for the better understanding and improvement of below listed difficulties in domestic politics and social interactions regarding the “displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh”, as the government in Yerevan defines them since granting them temporary protection officially, according to the international law on refugee support. Other than that, further analysis of presented voices and their opinions regarding their tense situation may be helpful for finding common solutions for the improvement of some of local issues, such as the highly challenging church-state relationship in Armenia, which among other problems often relates to the memorization vs. forgetting of the historical past, the traditional glorification of the first Karabakh War and the rights of its people. Finally, this compact study may also be beneficial for diasporan and international partners who, apart from their material support of the refugees, also want to work as neutral facilitators and mediators both for the stability of this country, particularly in the short- and mid-term perspectives, and for reconciliation in the South Caucasus and subsequent regional peace in general in the long-term perspective.

1. Context and research questions

It is over a year since the Azerbaijani armed forces accomplished a so-called ‘anti-terror operation’ and violently took over the internationally not recognized but de facto independent Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (NK), which Armenians termed *Artsakh* according to the historical name of the province. However, since the end of the 44-day war in 2020, it was semi-independent, because of the total financial protectorate of RA and administrative custody of Russia. Officially, it was assigned under the protection of Russian peacekeepers, who stood there since November 2020 with almost 2000 soldiers, which probably didn’t have either enough strength and determination, or just the order from Moscow to stop the ongoing military threats and aggressive attacks of Azerbaijan (AZ) (Hovhannisyan, 2024). After a short period of armed resistance, which lasted about 24 hours, the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh took place on September 20, 2023.

The last president of the de facto NK-republic Samvel Shahramanyan confirmed that Russian troops did nothing for their protection: “When the hostilities started, I realized that we were alone against Azerbaijani aggression. The Russian side, one could say, was in the status of an observer,

and it was us who should be able to settle our issues.” (Artsakh Public TV, 2023). Therefore, in his interpretation there were no other chances left but to fight and negotiate simultaneously:

“Together with the Defense Forces and other law enforcement agencies, as well as our population, we launched retaliatory operations to hostilities. Those operations made it possible to start negotiations with Azerbaijan, which lasted for about 12 hours. It was clear that the operations should be stopped since the forces were unequal.” (Ibid.)

According to him, Armenians were forced to sign a ceasefire and involuntarily accept several obligations, such as the dissolution of all official institutions of NK by January 1, 2024. In the same interview, while answering different questions, Shahramanyan defined independently three principles which correlate and exemplarily represent the attitude of most of the Karabakh-Armenians towards those disastrous events. These statements signify in the best way their collective response to the loss of their country and sum up the future perspectives: a) They didn’t leave NK earlier, even not during the heavy blockade, although they were expecting immense Azeri aggression, because they didn’t want to give up their homeland without resistance; b) But on September 20, 2023 they were enforced to sign a ceasefire and not a capitulation, because the forces were unequal and they wanted to save at least as much lives of their family members as possible by avoiding the further fighting with expected big number of casualties; c) Now and in the future their aim is to return to their homeland, and therefore, they are going to work on this purpose as much as they can (Ibid.).

Concerning the context of this attitude, it should be mentioned that consequently, as a result of the 35-year confrontation, the entire Armenian population of NK was forced to leave their motherland, except for some representatives of the government and military, who were arrested by Azerbaijani forces and taken as “hostages” and imprisoned later in Baku for the upcoming “show processes” (Ocampo, 2025). After that, only around 20 elderly people stayed in the capital of NK, most of whom had several health issues and refused to be displaced. They received about one visit per month from the representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). However, once the Russian military also left NK, the office of ICRC, was moved out from Stepanakert and relocated to Barda in April 2024. As a matter of fact, it was the only transnational organization left in the area since resolving the de facto republic of NK. Since March 2025, not only the ICRC, but even such important bodies as the UN Development Program (UNDP) and UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) were ordered by the Azerbaijani government that “they must leave” the country completely (Kuenning/Farhadova, 2025). According to the Azerbaijani pro-government media, the main reason for the decision was that Azerbaijan was able to “address emerging challenges independently”, including those specifically related to NK, because through 2025, more than \$2.4 billion had already been allocated for the reconstruction of the region (Ibid.). In addition to criticizing the two aforementioned UN agencies for supporting the “anti-governmental tendencies” in the country, the ICRC was “convicted” specifically, as of “serious suspicions of hostile, particularly espionage activities against the Azerbaijani Army” during the second NK war: “We have repeatedly witnessed that the ICRC operates under double standards, with anti-Turkish chauvinism, indulgence towards Armenian provocations, and complete indifference to the problems of Azerbaijanis, among other issues” (Ibid.).

The last Ombudsman of de facto republic of NK -Gegham Stepanyan stated that at the end of 2024, there were only 13 Armenians left in the former capital of NK (News.am, 2024). According to him, this very vulnerable group was misrepresented as a “sarcastic symbol of (a) defeated” and deported nation. Once they walk down the streets and get filmed against their own will, they are often mocked and humiliated in Azeri social media (i.e. see the copy of such a dehumanizing video on the X-account by Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh Human Rights Ombudsman, 2024). One of these people, Ms. Vera Aghasyan, died on October 20, 2024, in Stepanakert but her body could not be transferred yet to Armenia and is kept now in special refrigerators in the morgue. Even this tragic case is used by Azeri officials to blame Armenia allegedly for “failing to transport her body for more than 5 months” (OC Media, 2025). Moreover, there are plenty of other pictures and video materials both in official sources of Baku and Azeri social media, showing the destruction of Armenian cultural heritage, the desecration of churches, elimination of graveyards, and the burglary of private houses in NK. Although many prominent scholars warn about an “ongoing cultural genocide”, nothing has changed on the ground (Monument Watch, n.d.; Caucasus Heritage Watch, 2023 & 2024).

Nevertheless, and despite such terrifying news, most Karabakh-Armenians continue to believe in the possibility of returning to their homes, as their last president stated in his above-mentioned interview. This argument is often quoted by them for the explanation on why so many individuals and families from NK did not apply for the citizenship of the Republic of Armenia (RA). In all my conversations with their representatives, they speak about their life in NK in the present tense. They speak about their homes, church, lands, rivers, woods, gardens or domestic animals that they *have* in NK-. Also, when someone asks them about their future perspectives, there is a strong mention about not undermining the international “principle of the right to return” (Cf. UN Commission on Human Rights, Res. 1996/71), which means, they always remember about the right of getting back to their homes and assets, as it is also stated in the FAQ on Temporary Protection issued jointly by Migration and Citizenship Service of RA and Office of the UNHCR in Armenia:

“[Q.] What about my right to return and property rights in NK? [A.] Property rights of persons who find themselves in situations of international displacement are safeguarded under international and regional human rights law, regardless of the legal status granted to the concerned persons. Similarly, the right to return should not be affected by the legal status granted to the persons finding themselves in a situation of international displacement.” (UNHCR, 2024a, S. 5. Cf. also International Humanitarian Law, Chapter 38, Rule 133, which requires that the “property rights of displaced persons must be respected”).

This means that their attention is still and mainly focused on their past, which nevertheless is being understood as their present. Therefore, it is something real for them, for which they want to struggle as much as possible and as long as they live. Surely this attitude keeps the old narratives or creates new resentment by making the process of integration in the new context very difficult for most of them. How is this mental attitude going to affect the locals?

Today, due to the fraught social and political situation in RA and continuing tension in the South Caucasus, several interdisciplinary studies will be needed for an objective evaluation of what is happening and what may happen in the future. Within such studies the situation of Karabakh-

Armenians should not be ignored, because both their traumatic memories and future expectations are directly connected with the current social questions of Armenia and its international political challenges, at least concerning regional stability. That is why the following research questions should also be taken into consideration, if a harmonious coexistence within Armenia and transnational cooperation within this region is indeed desired:

- What happens to these 120.000 people who fled from their homeland either during the last Karabakh War in 2020 or after the final takeover of NK in September 2023?
- Are there precise data and reliable statistics on this target group?
- How is their integration going in the RA? Do they have difficulties in the labor market? Are their housing issues solved somehow?
- What happens to their special non-material cultural characteristics and distinctive faith traditions?
- How do they view the loss of their homeland, the destruction of cultural treasures and religious objects in their homeland?
- Can their identity as *Gharabaghtsi* (In local dialect and especially used by seniors: inhabitants of NK) be preserved further on? Or are there too many tensions with the residents of RA because of that?
- What are their future perspectives in general and possible life orientations in particular?
- Do they want to wait as long as necessary to return to their homeland, or would they prefer to emigrate and live somewhere else?
- Are there possibly new narratives, political ideas, psychological solutions, and constructive theological interpretations arising in their thoughts or around them?

During my previous research in such disciplines as Religion & Politics and Peace & Conflict Studies, I have already conducted several studies and published initial results on some of these topics (i.e. Harutyunyan, 2024a; Harutyunyan, 2024b). But working longer as a volunteer counselor and project fundraiser directly with a big number of these people, I came to a much clearer hypothesis: The special characteristics and uniqueness of the Karabakh-Armenians enabled them not only to survive so far (even without a proper statehood during several centuries), but also to continue providing a strong motivation to struggle further as much as possible for returning to their historical homeland and live there in their traditional way as before. Therefore, most of them don't want just to continue their physical existence in RA now or to migrate somewhere else in this world and forget about their past, but to mobilize all possible resources and go back to NK. And that is why, in their own perception it is 'natural' that they have many emotional barriers or even serious psychological problems in concern of their integration in the RA.

For the in-depth exploration of this distinct drive in them, which hinders their proper integration here (willingly or unwillingly), this analytical paper was conducted, thanks to the academic interest and cooperative support of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS). Since attention to this topic was conducted after one year in the midst of other conflicting areas, there are few international studies addressing the aforementioned research questions. Most of the local publications from RA are published by the media for a general audience reflecting a specific political agenda. Unfortunately,

until April 2025 it is not easy to find unbiased and objective sources for a scientific review of this topic.

Therefore, the methodology of this research paper was based first of all on the investigation of significant information published to date by official institutions on this matter. Secondly, it undertook the organization of academic interviews with state officers, religious leaders from NK and RA, international bodies and NGOs, which are operating directly with these people. The final desired outcome is to compile a summary of collected multidisciplinary materials from the perspectives of Practical & Political Theologies, which are the disciplines that I am working with. These results may hopefully feature further research by other local and international colleagues, who are especially interested in the related fields and seeking better and more applicable conclusions.

2. Our citizens or foreign refugees?

Once the Azerbaijani checkpoint on the Lachin Corridor - installed illegally in April 2023 during the total blockade of NK against the previous trilateral agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia from November 9, 2020 - was reopened on the late afternoon of September 24, 2023, the Karabakh-Armenians hurried massively towards the Hakari bridge by the Kornidzor village in the southern Armenian province of Syunik. According to many witnesses, most of the people thought that not everyone could cross the RA border. They panicked, that maximum 1/3 of the population may leave, because those who, for example, have served in the army or worked in state institutions should either be imprisoned by Azeris or be kept in NK for the “show” and, accordingly, for the justification of further presence of Russian troops in NK (Harutyunyan, 2024b, 83f). The last NK-president Shahramanyan confirmed it too, that there were massive rumors spread, about this checkpoint to be operated only for a couple of days (Artsakh Public TV, 2023). That is why there was a chaotic rush, which, together with an individual photo and video session of all male citizens at Azerbaijani checkpoint, caused a big traffic jam, so that the journey of about 70 km between Stepanakert and Kornidzor was covered within 2-3 days (Jessen, 2023). Once they reached the border of RA, a special certificate was provided to them by registration, which confirmed their residency in the country and enabled participation in all possible support programs for internally displaced people (IDPs).

In its first official announcement on September 24, 2023, regarding the reopened checkpoint, the government of RA made the following statement:

“As of 18:00, 377 forcibly displaced citizens [Arm. *brni teghahanvatz qaghaqatz*] entered Armenia from NK. Of these, support needs for 216 have been summarized, and the needs of 161 are still being identified. Out of the 216 registered, 118 wanted to go to places of residence decided by themselves, and 98 are currently in government-provided housing. Registration for support needs is ongoing” (Government of RA, 2023a).

However, in its second announcement on the same evening, these citizens are called just “persons” [Arm. *andz*], without any indication of their nationality. From the next day, similar reports presented another definition: “forcibly displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh” [Arm. *LGH-*

itz brni teghahanvatz andzing] (Ibid.). The governmental chronicle of October 3, 2023, similarly mentioned already about 100,625 “persons”. After this a substantial report came from October 20, 2023, where Armen Ghazaryan, the head of the Migration and Citizenship Service, spoke about the registered and identified data of 101,848 people. Among other relevant topics he ensured, that, in case they lost their documents, the “passport service departments have been instructed to serve our compatriots [Arm. *hayrenakitzner*] forcibly displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh in an emergency mode” (Government of RA, 2023c).

These different definitions show that in the first four weeks after the displacement of the Karabakh-Armenians, officially or at least publicly, they were still not considered as non-RA citizens. Only on October 25, during the usual Wednesday cabinet session, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan indicated that “his government does not regard refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh as Armenian citizens despite the fact that virtually all of them hold Armenian passports” (Azatutyun.am, 2023a), which had the identical serial numbers starting with 070. Therefore, all NK-Armenians will be granted with “temporary protection” instead and will be formalized in their “status of refugees”, which should increase “the possibilities of protecting their rights in the local and international arenas” (Government of RA, 2023c). On the next day the special decree of the government was published regarding this (No. 1864-N, from 26 October 2023). This was a sudden shock both for the population of NK, who lost their homes and hardly escaped from death, and for their local, diaspora, and international supporters, who were trying their best to assist in social and administrative issues. The last de facto NK President Shahramanyan himself admitted that he did not understand this status of temporary protection at all and was going to clarify it with the government of RA (Artsakh Public TV, 2023).

Shortly after the prime minister’s official statement, Arpine Sargsyan, the deputy minister of Internal Affairs, presented some details:

“Thanks to the temporary protection status, our compatriots will be able to have higher protection both in the territory of the Republic of Armenia and outside [...] according to the Law of the Republic of Armenia ‘On Refugees and Asylum’, in fact, our compatriots are recognized as refugees and benefit from all international convention mechanisms and, in fact, are under international protection both in the territory of the Republic of Armenia, and outside” (Government of RA, 2023d).

She added also that the above-mentioned status would be granted for a period of one year, with the opportunity of extension. A few days later, Armen Ghazaryan, the head of Migration and Citizenship Service, made a much clearer statement by explaining that the Armenian passports given to NK-Armenians were granted to them only as “travel documents” without real citizenship. According to him: “The Armenian government expressed a similar position in the European Court, that the passports were issued to the people of Nagorno-Karabakh as travel documents and not as a certificate of citizenship” (Civilnet, 2023).

This brought much more confusion than probably expected. It was a serious controversy, because approximately 15,000-20,000 other NK-residents took shelter in RA prior to the ethnic cleansing of September 2023. These were mostly the residents from Shushi and Hadrut cities or the nearby villages from these two regions, and other territories, which were either lost or returned to AZ after

the Second Karabakh-War in 2020. That contingent had sought a similar status as refugees for almost three years in hopes of receiving regular government aid. However, according to their records, they were refused, because the state officials were repeatedly telling them they do not qualify for such a status because of being ‘citizens of RA’. According to Radio Free Europe/Azatutyun this was also the statement of the Migration Service before the decree from October 26, 2023: “If they have Armenian passports, it means they are citizens of Armenia” (Azatutyun.am, 2023).

Until now most of the people from NK, which were interviewed, were sincerely confused because of this issue. Especially those who had administrative problems with their paperwork for the application of RA-citizenship (i.e. because they did not bring their birth certificates with them and were not properly registered in NK and must wait for the bureaucratic confirmation), did not understand what was going on. They asked me often the same question: “Why Pashinyan and his government deprived them so suddenly from the proper citizenship?” Since there was no official or at least publicly available information in the national or international sector about the legal status of the population of NK prior to their displacement, it came as very sudden and bad news for this vulnerable group of people. The only indicators that existed in that sense and could probably provide clarity on this matter were such facts, as a) Karabakh-Armenians couldn’t vote in RA before, because they were registered officially in NK. But vice versa too, the RA citizens, who were living in NK couldn’t vote there as well; b) In case of taking a mortgage, the residents from NK weren’t allowed to do that in the banking system of RA.

Again, as the case may be, many Armenians from NK (and some from RA too) who are not so familiar with juridical issues and international law, ask themselves furthermore: wouldn’t it be more appropriate to categorize this target group as “stateless refugees” (according to the Conventions from 1954/1961) who have fled from a real genocide, instead of calling them just “displaced people”, who are recognized as victims of ethnic cleansing in Azerbaijan, which, however, doesn’t put any juridical pressure on Aliyev regime, not to mention any further legal consequences for his trial by the international tribunal?

Following information could be found from the official website of Migration and Citizenship Service, where the NK-Armenians can apply for RA-citizenship:

“By the decision of the Government of the Republic of Armenia No. 1864-N, dated October 26, 2023, it has been established that the following individuals are subject to temporary protection: Individuals registered in the population registry of Nagorno-Karabakh; Individuals located within the territory of the Republic of Armenia or outside the Republic of Armenia, whose last registered address was in Nagorno-Karabakh; Individuals who were not registered in the population registry of Nagorno-Karabakh, but who lived in Nagorno-Karabakh and, after being forcibly displaced as a result of the military actions launched by Azerbaijan against Nagorno-Karabakh on September 19, 2023, have been registered by the Migration and Citizenship Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. The status of temporary protection does not apply to individuals who are citizens of another state” (Migration and Citizenship Service, n.d.).

One of my questions during the conversation with the representative of the RA government (see below Chapter 4) was about the existence of any previously available public information on the

issued Armenian passports in NK, which, however, did not represent a RA-citizenship, there was no answer but a suggestion to contact the Citizenship Service of the Ministry of Interior Affairs of RA (MCS). Upon my written request concerning this issue with the previous status of Karabakh-Armenians and on the current numbers of applications for RA-citizenship, the MCS answered, that they “don’t possess any information” about the first question. Relating to the second point with statistics, their response was: “We state, that as of March 10, 2025, there are 8046 applications; the RA-citizenship was granted to 7250 persons according to the order of the president of RA and 796 applications are still in the process of examination” (Signed by the vice chief of MCS, Mariam Gevorgyan on March 10, 2025).

Even after more than a year only about 8000 people from approximately 120.000 or respectively 6.6 % of the whole group have applied and only 6.04% became RA-citizens till March 2025. And the question is, will this number change much in future? If not, what is going to happen to these people, who don’t want to apply for the RA-citizenship? The procedure for issuing a special document certifying the identity of a refugee was recognized with a similar governmental decision. The new “passport of a refugee” should correspond to the description of the passport established by the government of the RA’s decision No. 821, dated December 25, 1998. Its barcode is printed now in the same way exclusively with the code starting with the numbers “070”, as it has been printed before, (Migration and Citizenship Service, n.d.).

Coming to one of the vital research questions about proper integration and future perspectives in RA, it becomes one of the biggest administrative challenges. If only 6.6% of the Karabakh-Armenians have applied for Armenian citizenship, most of these refugees will receive an extension of their “temporary protection” and live in the waiting modus, until one day they may return to their historical homeland, because AZ does not accept the dual citizenship. But if their return to NK seems impossible for a long period of time and the socio-political situation in RA will become more instable, perhaps they would want migrate to another developed country in the future. The administrative court of the city of Kassel in Germany has already made a precedent ruling, recognizing that the former resident of Karabakh is considered a “stateless person” and cannot return to NK, considering that he will be subject to prosecution by Azerbaijan (Vardanyan/Pracht, 2024). So, once, their temporary protection as a group is over and if RA decides not to extend it anymore, they may leave the country or apply for individual protection by UNHCR and keep the refugee status after that. The same status should be granted to their newborn children afterwards. That is why, this question remains open: if they or their next generation will have administrative or legal problems with this, will they become de facto “stateless refugees” as it was already recognized in the mentioned court case in Germany? (Ibid.). Besides all these uncertainties, there are other issues for them to worry about, such as the Armenian prisoners in Baku.

3. Worries about remaining civil hostages and prisoners of war

There was an official report of Investigative Committee of the RA published on October 31, 2023, which is entitled as “Summary on the Process of Investigation of Cases on Ethnic Cleansing Committed in Nagorno Karabakh and War Crimes Committed during It” (Investigative Committee

of the RA, 2023). It presents data on the aforementioned events and the numbers of casualties. Regarding the people who could escape to RA, the following statement was found:

“As a result of planned and deliberate policy of ethnic cleansing against the population of Nagorno Karabakh, military actions committed on September 19-20, 2023 which is a part of it, nearly the whole population of NK, more than 100 thousand people, solely out of a need to survive physically, were forcibly displaced not having proper time and opportunity to take their property” (Ibid.).

The exact number of survivors and those who already had left NK before September 2023 remained unclear at least in this report. However, there are other important data in this statement, such as on the very last casualties and their reasons, which happened during their escape:

“Moreover, during the forced displacement and in the period immediately following it death of 64 civilians was recorded which was directly causally related to the deprivations suffered during the period of siege, ethnic cleansing and displacement, such as hunger, lack of medicine and medical assistance, etc.” (Ibid.).

According to many Karabakh-Armenians and their supporters in RA, these facts should provide juridical reasons for a war crime or even a genocide against AZ. Besides that, this report shows that even the signing of a ceasefire and factual capitulation didn't stop the authorities of Baku to take additional prisoners:

“The cases of abduction of civilians, among them the representatives of military-political leadership of Nagorno Karabakh, captivity of servicemen was also made the subject of investigation by the investigative body. At the current stage of investigation there are data on abduction of 16 persons, 6 servicemen and 10 civilians” (Ibid.).

These people are still held in prisons of Baku with seven other Armenian captives from NK. There were many manifests and petitions against this inhuman action, which goes against any logic of peacemaking. The former Ombudsman of RA, Arman Tatoyan is sure, that the so-called court “trials for show” became a testing stone for many Armenians: “The Azerbaijani authorities will use the ‘trials’ [...] to establish itself at the expense of the dignity of the Armenian people, to degrade our national consciousness, and to deepen the tension and division among us” (Tatoyan Foundation, 2025). Especially the recent proclamation of a hunger strike by Ruben Vardanyan, former “minster president” of NK and the public appeal of his son to support and rescue all these hostages, garnered serious attention in RA and diaspora regarding this problem.

According to many local and international observers, these people - caught illegally after the ceasefire on September 20, 2023 - are shown now in propaganda trails first of all “for the self-glorification of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in the eyes of the internal auditorium” (Civilnet, 2025a). Such constructed court cases are mostly warnings for the opposition in their own rows (Ibid.). But they can be also used for the collection of fake materials on the alleged ‘terroristic plans’ of Armenians and fabrication of new ‘casus belli’ against RA (Free Armenian Hostages Civic Movement, 2025). As the former Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court Luis Moreno Ocampo addresses on his official website, the criminal trials from January 2025 against former high-ranking officials of NK are already predetermined. He makes the following comparison:

“Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev has resurrected one of Joseph Stalin’s most sinister tools: the show trial. Just as Stalin’s purges in the 1930s relied on forced confessions and sham trials to kill his rivals and strengthen his totalitarian grip on power, Aliyev is using judicial theatre to mask his crimes” (Ocampo, 2025).

Armenian foreign minister Ararat Mirzoyan also described the current Azeri court attempt as “mocking trials”. According to him, the previous challenges stay unresolved and the terrifying statements coming from AZ

“continue to question the territorial integrity of Armenia, despite the recognition of each other's territorial integrity based on the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration, which among others had reconfirmed that the administrative boundaries of the Armenian SSR and the Azerbaijani SSR had become international borders between the two independent republics. Moreover, as we speak, the mock trials against 23 Armenian individuals – who are arbitrarily detained, are taking place in Azerbaijan with disregard of human right standards for due process” (Mirzoyan, 2025).

As the demonstrations in Yerevan on February 28, 2025, and many other voices in public and social media show - both from parliamentary opposition and from the worried compatriots from RA and diaspora - this topic is bringing again much more hostility against Azeris as probably expected from the Baku regime. Not only the traumatized people from NK but also many representatives from the NGO-sector are not scared, on the contrary, extremely disappointed and angry. Therefore, they tried to reach their complaint to the president of ICRC (Голос Армении, 2025a)., ICRC was the only organization that met with the Armenian prisoners in Baku, “focusing on recording the conditions of their detentions and their health” (Kuenning/Farhadova, 2025). And maybe that was also one of the main reasons why AZ ordered this international body to leave their country (Reuters, 2025).

Those Karabakh-Armenians, who were in Yerevan at that moment, protested before the buildings of the government of RA and the office of UNHCR by appealing again and again for justice on the international level. Even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of RA, which stays often silent in concern of other issues on Karabakh, published a clear official statement on this matter. Among other things it said, that “the staged trials against some of them, are being conducted with gross procedural violations and clear signs of torture” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025a). Furthermore, it declared:

“Armenian prisoners of war, hostages and other detainees are being unlawfully held in Azerbaijan in blatant disregard of its commitments and international obligations. Their detention and persecution constitute a gross violation of international humanitarian law and fundamental human rights. A mere listing of the relevant international multilateral documents includes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, The Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Geneva Convention IV (1949) and European Convention on Human Rights. It is evident that the Azerbaijani authorities are using this judicial spectacle as a tool for political pressure on the Republic of Armenia and for manipulation within society, given the sensitivity of the issue for every family member and the entire society. It is particularly noteworthy that these processes are taking place amid the continued propaganda of ethnic hatred against Armenians in Azerbaijani media” (Ibid.).

Apart from this official statement, it was also very unusual, that Pashinyan himself raised this issue in his answer in the RA Parliament by saying, that “We have information that prohibited means - physical, psychological, pressure tools, and others - are being used to exert prohibited influence on them, they are being tortured” (Mediamax, 2025). He also underlined that “Armenian diplomacy is doing everything possible, guided by the principle of to do no harm, to return Armenian prisoners of war held in Baku” (Ibid.).

According to Armenian sources, it is not the first time that the Baku regime is acting this way and is torturing people in its prisons (Human Rights Defender of RA, 2021; Arakelyan, 2021). Even after the ceasefire of November 9, 2020, with the trilateral agreement, which among other points confirmed also the return of all prisoners, AZ continued to take new hostages subsequently, despite the cessation of hostilities. The captured people were still declared as “prisoners of war” and their elementary Human Rights were violated again (Center for Trust and Justice, 2021). There were other highly disputed trials in Baku, both against imprisoned Armenians and their own oppositional thinkers, which were used in Baku for the ‘self-glorification of their autocratic ruler and oppression of any possible free thinkers or critics’ (Human Rights Defender of RA, 2021). Therefore, many international organizations appealed for the release of Armenian hostages, such as the European Parliament, which voted with the vast majority of voices on March 13, 2025 (523 votes to 3, with 84 abstentions) for the “Resolution [Nr. Nr. 2025/2596 (RSP)] on the unlawful detention and sham trials of Armenian hostages, including high-ranking political representatives from Nagorno-Karabakh, by Azerbaijan” (European Parliament, 2025).

Not even the complete takeover of NK and total ethnic cleansing of all the Karabakh-Armenians satisfied Aliyev. According to the interviewed Karabakh-Armenians, it seems that AZ government is trying to spread further fears among Armenians through such humiliating actions, so that they never think about returning to their homes. The same hostile message is being spread also by his propaganda via social media and in the comments under each respective YouTube video on this topic in a nonstop modus. In doing so, the main message of the government of AZ and its supporters seems to be the same, that Karabakh-Armenians are not welcome anymore. In doing so, the main message of the government of AZ and its supporters seems to be the same, that Karabakh-Armenians are not welcome in that country anymore. How does the government of RA work in this case for the integration of this ethnically cleansed target group?

4. Governmental support¹

¹ This chapter is based on the translated and paraphrased information from my academic interview with the Office of Deputy Prime Minister of RA coordinating humanitarian response to NK refugees/forcibly displaced population of NK, conducted in Yerevan on March 3, 2025. Following questions were asked from my side: How does the Government of RA evaluate the process of integration of displaced Armenians from NK? Which were your success cases and still open challenges in this process? Are there any defined criteria, for example with the list of

For objective answers on the integration of displaced people from NK, the facts and numbers instead of individual and subjective evaluations should be examined. A total of approximately 66 billion AMD (around 160 million EUR) was allocated from the state budget in 2024 to finance the programs supporting individuals forcibly displaced from NK. If the period since the commencement of these programs in September 2023 is considered, the total expenditure from the state budget has reached over 100 billion AMD (around 242 million EUR).

To address the primary needs during the first days of displacement, approximately 4.4 billion AMD (around 10,6 million EUR) were allocated to the regional administrations of *marzpetarans* [Arm. governor's offices]. Of course, the RA-government had also strong support from international partners in this difficult period. Therefore, with joint services Armenia could accept and host more than 100,000 people and no one was left on the streets. Since crossing the Kornidzor checkpoint on the border with RA, the government has been providing essential support to displaced population, including the provision of core-relief items and temporary accommodation in various state-provided shelters, such as hotels, guesthouses, houses, and community buildings adapted as collective shelters. Therefore, there was no need for opening any tent-camps as could be seen in other countries during similar cases of emergencies and mass deportations.

Since October 26, 2023, this target group was recognized as refugees by the decree of the Government of RA and was granted collectively with the right of temporary protection, which was extended later for another year. For more detailed information on this status the Migration and Citizenship Service of the Ministry of Interior Affairs of RA should be contacted. Since November 2023 there was a shift in this approach: The RA was almost done with immediate support and started to show more institutionalized assistance. A one-time payment of AMD 100,000 (around 235 EURO) was made via bank transfers per displaced individual to address their immediate needs. A total of more than 113,900 individuals forcibly displaced from Nagorno Karabakh have benefited from the program, with the actual costs incurred from the state budget amounting to 11.39 billion AMD (around 27 million EURO). Then the government of RA transitioned from immediate support to other programs to ensure mid-term socio-economic stability of refugees. Every person started to receive 40,000+10,000 AMD (around 100+25 EURO) per month for house rental and utility costs. Since January 2024 the consent to use this support was also granted to those fleeing to Armenia after 27 September 2020. As a result, about 103,800 beneficiaries in 2024 continued to receive support within this program.

This last position has taken the largest portion of our budget till now and will be modified after April 1, 2025. The financial support will be reduced to 40,000 AMD (around 100 EURO) per month till July 2025 and later to 30,000 AMD (around 70 EURO), which will go till December 2025. While the scope of beneficiaries will remain unchanged from January to March 2025, the

priority topics, by which the Government of RA is measuring the process of integration of this target group? The provided information was revised and completed according to the statistical data from the official "Report on the Process and Results of the Implementation of the Program of the Government of the RA (2021-2026)" for the years 2023 and 2024.

program will then focus specifically on families with children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. Sure, there will be families who will still have different needs besides rental costs but the process of assisting them will be different now.

Regarding mid-term and long-term perspectives for their integration, the following fields and their actual data should be mentioned:

Medical Care - Persons forcibly displaced from NK, in case of registration in the primary healthcare centers, receive medical care and service on free terms guaranteed by the state, based on the provision of the Clause 2 of the order approved by Annex 12 of the Government's decision No. 318-N dated 4 March, 2004. As of the end of 2024, more than 77,000 individuals from NK have already been registered with primary healthcare institutions. The free hospital services within the framework of the 'State Order' became also available for this target group. Forming such intense support for primary care and hospital services took about 5.3 billion AMD (around 12,5 million EURO) from the state budget in 2024.

Pensions and Official Benefits - are paid on a regular basis from the state budget independently of the status of these people. As of December 31, 2023, more than 13,300 forcibly displaced people have submitted applications for a pension or benefit, of which 11,785 have already been paid (including 11,038 pensions). During 2024, monthly pensions received 28,259 people forcibly displaced from NK. As of December 2023, applications for benefits have been received from 930 people, including 165 for a lump-sum birth allowance of 300,000 AMD (around 705 Euro) for the first and second children and 626 for a childcare benefit of 31,600 AMD (around 75 EURO) per month for children under 2 years of age.

Education – More than 16.500 children from NK are going to public schools according to their registration locations. In addition, 4,000 students of state Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Higher Educational Institutions/Universities were matriculated here according to their previous professional or academic disciplines, whose continuity of education was ensured by the Government by subsidizing a significant portion of education fees. Initially all students could get full or partial financial assistance from the state for the payment of their study fees. Now there are specific requirements which they might comply with. The changes in September 2024 have been established that forcibly displaced students will continue to receive a scholarship until the end of their educational degree in case of providing the official set level of study progress. This means that all outstanding students will get this financial support till their graduation. The support of tuition reimbursement was also established in the 2024-2025 academic year, for those displaced freshmen students, who were newly accepted for their first semesters in any national vocational and higher education institutions. Only in 2024, 1,471 students of preliminary and secondary educational vocational institutions and 1,774 students of higher educational institutions/universities were beneficiaries of this program. Therefore, more than 1.4 billion AMD (around 3.3 million EURO) has been allocated from the state budget for compensation of tuition fees for professional instruction of displaced youth from NK.

Employment - All teachers and medical personnel who started to work in provinces got extra subsidized payments. Teachers receive a 30% monthly bonus within two years. Additionally,

teachers in the Syunik and Vayots Dzor *marzes* [Armenian administrative regions], as well as in the selected communities of Gegharkunik and Tavush regions, will receive an additional fixed bonus of 50,000 AMD (around 125 EURO). In 2024, the RA-government made changes in the previous program of forcibly displaced teachers from NK, giving for the existing vacancies an opportunity to replenish also to those teachers, who were displaced in 2020. In 2024, about 600 people were employed in public schools, 463 of which were sent to regional schools within the framework of this program, which only in 2024 required about 168.2 million AMD (around 396,000 EURO) for these teachers' monthly premium from the state budget. Moreover, the healthcare professionals who relocated to regional medical institutions receive additional monthly allowance equivalent to three times the minimum monthly salary specified in Article 1 of the RA Law 'On the minimum monthly salary' for a duration of up to 6 months. Many displaced people from NK got support for 'Short-Term Training and Acquiring Work Experience'. According to this program, the support to forcibly displaced people is designed through organizing short-term training courses, tuition reimbursement and scholarship provision, as well as assistance to the employers for compensating the salary or required tax/fees. Around 1,800 people involved could get jobs after that. As of December 31, 2024, the actual budget of this program amounted to about 895.3 million AMD (around 2.1 million EURO). Moreover, till December 2024 there were 21,800 contracted employees from NK and more than 4,600 people became self-employed or owners and participants of private businesses.

Housing - As a continuation of current financial assistance with rental and utility costs the government has launched a special program with granted certificates of 3, 4 or 5 million AMD per person, depending on the designated areas, where they either may buy an appartement in a building, or a private house with its territory or even build their new house with this amount. The closest choices to the borders of RA will be prioritized with 5 million AMD (around 11,700 EURO) per-person certificates to repopulate these rarely inhabited areas, which consist of 242 distinguished rural and urban communities. Respectively 4 million AMD (around 9,400 EURO) will be granted in 148 other pre-selected places in the regions, which are not regarded as border areas. Finally 3 million AMD (around 7,000 EURO) will be given in the case of implementing all other settlements, except the '1st and 2nd zones' in the center of Yerevan. However, they need to become RA citizens before for the involvement in this program. Also, within the framework of this support program, after becoming RA-citizens it is possible to apply as a displaced family for the repayment of some part of the current mortgage loan and the related interest, if some of them wish to take credit from one of the partner banks of RA-Government and go faster by their own purchase or construction. However, every member of such a family will be provided with 2 million AMD (around 4,700 EURO) in this case. As in previous cases with certificates, the family is considered a beneficiary of this housing funding if all family members, including minors, have RA-citizenship. The first round of the program started on June 15, 2024. Now around 750 families have received their certificates. After ten years these houses will become officially their own property. More information and the applications according to the prioritized categories of people and families can be found by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.²

² These regulations are changed after July 1, 2025.

RA-Citizenship - As for February 2025, almost 8.000 people have applied for RA citizenship. The government of RA does not see it as a low number, because this is an ongoing process and people can do that in future, even if they want to keep their former papers from NK. All of them have this right and there is a simplified process for their applications. If there are some people who still have questions on their former perception of ‘holding a RA-citizenship instead of just a travel document’, this should be also clarified by the Migration and Citizenship Service, because this department has all information on this. In concern of those people who already left the country, it should be possible to request statistics from the Border Guard Troops of the National Security Service of RA.

Concerning the question on the defined criteria with the list of priority topics, by with the Government of RA could measure the process of integration, there is no such information. This question should be asked by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, and they might have such a list with criteria and priorities. For more detailed information you should check the report of RA-Government on the program activities and spent budget for 2024 and the last part of 2023 (Cf. Parliament of RA, 2025, p. 58-6; Armenian Legal Information System, 2024, p. 3-6). Finally, for the long-term perspectives RA wants to give these people sustainable living conditions. And for that the government would emphasize mostly the question of employment and housing.

5. Statistics on registered settlement

From earlier chapters it is notable that there were many official publications and interviews about Karabakh-Armenians in the first 2-3 months after their displacement. After that, only some authorized publications and compact media investigations were found, conducted mostly in September 2024, which related to the memorization of the first anniversary after the enforced exodus (Hambardzumyan, 2024). I have tried to collect as much actual data for my research directly from different ministries and state departments as possible, which are responsible for the integration of NK-refugees in RA. However, my requests to most of the responsible institutions - with prepared sets of questions - remained either unanswered or not approved properly (i.e. as ‘non-correct applications’, or ‘didn’t have my handwritten signature on the request’ or where just ‘wrongly addressed requests’).

The only institution, which sent me a solid and actualized account, was the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of RA (Signed by the Head of Department of Demography and Family Social Securities, Artak Harutyunyan on February 5, 2025). The information provided confirms almost all points from the previous chapter on governmental support. It gives also details on the dates when the respective decisions were taken, under which numbers they were recorded, and how long they were valid. For example, the aforementioned one-time supportive payments of 100,000 AMD (to address the immediate needs of NK-refugees) were transferred from October 2023 till January 2024, and the number of people who received that benefit was 113,646 as of January 31, 2024 (Ibid.). Also, this document confirms that the supplementary 40,000+10,000 AMD (for rental and utility costs) were transferred between October 2023 - March 2025. However, those people who stayed temporarily in protected social institutions, communal shelters, public properties,

hotels/hostels or had their own property of more than 20 square meters, didn't get these amounts. Therefore, the total number of beneficiaries who received this type of assistance only in December 2024, was 104,000 (Ibid.). While giving this aid, the aforementioned state support program for housing was approved by the decision of the government No. 710-L from May 16, 2024. Its main goal is "the social and economic inclusion of people forcibly displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh by creating the necessary conditions for long-term residence in the Republic of Armenia" (Ibid.). Furthermore it states:

"1,561 beneficiaries have applied to the program" as of February 5, 2025, "of which 542 have been approved and have received a certificate, 1,019 applications have been rejected on the basis of not meeting any of the program conditions. 5 of the approved certificates have been implemented, and another 15 are in the mortgage lending stage" (Ibid.).

Unfortunately, this report did not answer questions concerning the evaluation of the process of integration and did not mention any established criteria for the successful development of this multilevel process. But it gave at least the information that 113,646 refugees from NK were here between October 2023 - January 2024 because they received one-time financial support from the state. And at least 104,000 of them were staying in hired apartments or houses till December 2024, while receiving rental and utility support from the government. Furthermore, it states that only 542 housing certificates have been granted as of February 5, 2025, although there were more applications. The report does not mention anything about the requirement of RA-citizenship for this program. And it also does not clarify why exactly the 1,019 applications did not meet any of the housing program conditions.

From other open-source publications could be discovered that the displaced people from NK lived or continue to live in the following administrative regions of RA:

Registered settlement in the regions of RA	As of October 1, 2023, according to the official statement of the RA-Government (Government of RA, 2023b)	As of September 19, 2024, according to the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure (Hambardzumyan, 2024)	As of December 18, 2024, according to the Migration and Citizenship Service (UNHCR-Armenia, 2025c)
Aragatsotn	2,317	4,014	3,854
Ararat	12,395	14,743	11,986
Armavir	4,308	10,416	10,970
Gegharkunik	3,848	3,468	3,537
Lori	2,435	5,496	4,229
Kotayk	11,368	20,331	18,622
Shirak	2,231	3,368	4,034
Syunik	4,175	3,439	6,547
Vayots Dzor	1,923	1,274	2,135
Tavush	2,322	2,383	2,962
Total in regions:	47,322	68,932	68,876

Yerevan	<i>No data</i>	<i>No data</i>	46,512
Total in RA:	100,490	<i>No data</i>	115,388

It remains unclear why there was no proper information about the settlement of Karabakh-Armenians in Yerevan at the beginning. If the governmental announcement from October 1, 2023, mentions the total number of 100,490 persons (Government of RA, 2023b), then it would be possible also to count the difference with regions, which was 47,322, and assume that 53,168 people came to the capital. But it could be a misleading calculation, because it might include also those people who didn't do any registration or those who left the country immediately. Moreover, it is not clear why even one year later the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure did not provide any information about registration of displaced people in Yerevan (Hambardzumyan, 2024). But the Migration and Citizenship Service does it three months later and submits the number of 46,512 to UNCHR-Armenia for the creation of following overview map on the refugee population in RA as of December 2024. [MAP: Overview of Refugee Population as of December 2024 (UNCHR-Armenia, 2025d)].

One assumption on these statistical issues could relate to the unclear number of displaced people, who came from NK to Yerevan before September 2023. If there were around 20,000 people who were not able to be registered in RA as refugees yet - as the representatives from NK proclaimed - then they could not be counted officially at least in the first quarter. Another issue has to do with the number of those Karabakh-Armenians, who left RA almost immediately after their displacement. According to the data, which was provided previously by National Security Service to CivilNet 19,570 forcibly displaced persons from NK left RA by air and land, and 8,219 returned as of July 1, 2024. That is to say, till the middle of last summer 11,351 Karabakh-Armenians left RA and did not return (CivilNet, 2024). The same media shows the updated information for the following months, like for January 1, 2025, and it can be seen there that 26,397 of these people have left and 14,871 returned. It means that at the beginning of this year altogether 11,526 Karabakh-Armenians left RA either for temporary or permanent residence in foreign countries (Ibid.). Upon my last written request, the Border Guard Troops of the National Security Service of RA responded with following statistics: Till September 2023 the number of displaced persons from NK was 115,073 and 11,312 of them left the country till March 2025 (Signed by the Vice-Director S. Gevorgyan on April 7, 2025). So, the difference between July 2024 – March 2025 shows, that the number of emigrated Karabakh-Armenians did not become actually higher within those nine months and remains about 9.8% of their total number.

Last but not least, the table on the numbers of NK-refugees in regions shows that these people predominantly preferred to live either in Yerevan or in the closest regions to the capital, like Kotayk, Armavir, and Ararat. This is understandable because of the big difficulties with the job market in the rural areas. However, most of them, who either do not have RA-citizenship yet and are therefore not eligible for the new housing program with subsidized certificates or have the RA-citizenship but will receive their certificates only in one or two years, are going to have serious housing issues soon because of the closure of previous welfare programs and further financial difficulties. Since April 1, 2025, many of them have lost their previous assistance for rental and

utility costs. This means it will be impossible for them to stay in or around the capital with current explosive rental prices. Therefore, additional aid in this and many other aspects is still needed.

6. Cooperation with UNHCR and ICRC

The report of the RA-government on the budget of 2023 states that between October-December of that year, many foreign organizations have provided financial or in-kind support for humanitarian assistance to forcibly displaced people from NK. As of December 2023, significant portion of this support has been allocated to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and other development agencies. The total amount of financial help allocated was around 109 million USD, of which around 36 million USD has been provided through UNHCR and its partners within the framework of the Refugee Response Program, around 26 million USD through the ICRC, and around 13 million USD through USAID. The EU and several foreign governments have provided direct budget support of around 17 million USD, and 16 million USD has been allocated to the World Bank to increase the concessional of budget support loans (Armenian Legal Information System, 2024, p. 4-5).

This statistic shows that one of the most significant international organizations, which works now in RA directly with NK-Armenians is the UN Refugee Agency. The UNHCR was established in Armenia in 1992 (UNCHR, 2025a). Now it is actively involved in the allied support of displaced people together with the RA-government or respectively with regional administrations (UNCHR, 2025b). According to the joint statement from October 11, 2024, entitled “From Dialogue to Actions” which represents the “Stakeholder Dialogue on Pledges by Armenia at Global Refugee Forum” between RA Ministry of Foreign Affairs and UNHCR-Amenia, already in October 2023 a coordination framework was set up to support the government of RA by UNHCR and other international partners. This helped to develop a direct refugee response plan, which complemented the official efforts in addressing the immediate needs of refugees from NK (MFA-UNHCR, 2024, p. 1). Moreover, around 60 partners, including UN agencies such as UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, IOM, UN Women, ILO, UNESCO, FAO, UNAIDS and WHO, many other international organizations, and NGOs mobilized around 50 million USD to help the governmental programs during the emergency phase between October 2023 - March 2024 (Ibid.; UNCHR-Armenia, 2023).

The joint statement informs also, that the government of RA has shown strong solidarity to refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons in general, by welcoming and assisting the new arrivals in line with the principle of Global Compact on Refugees and Armenia’s pledges (Cf. the main text of GCR by United Nations, 2018). This process involves around 115,000 refugees from NK, who have been granted temporary protection, and 4,078 refugees from countries like Iraq, Syria, Ukraine, Egypt, Myanmar, Congo, and Sudan as of October 2024 (MFA-UNHCR, 2024, p. 1). This means, that in total, refugees make up about 4% of Armenia’s population - around one in every thirty people (Statistical Committee RA, 2022). Most of this contingent is located in different regions across Armenia, with the largest groups living in Yerevan (40%) and the neighboring

regions to the capital, such as Kotayk (16%), Ararat (11%), and Armavir (9%). [See the Demographic map of refugee population in Armenia, as of December 2024].

However, anticipating further refugee movement and planning for their support remains a significant challenge (MFA-UNHCR, 2024, p. 1). Most of these challenges are linked to the socioeconomical and political context of this country:

“By tackling both refugee-specific needs and shared community level struggles, the aim is to foster sustainable integration and build resilience for both refugees and host populations. This approach reflects commitment to the GCR principles, which emphasizes responsibility sharing, and supporting long term inclusion of refugees and strengthening the capacity of host communities” (Ibid., p. 2. For detailed analysis of the context and support already provided by UNHCR see more at UNRIC Library Backgrounder: Karabakh, 2025).

This important work has a compact list of priorities, developed for such cases, which was also confirmed by the RA government in 2016 according to the principles of Global Compact on Refugees. It was revitalized with seven new pledges in 2019 and with six additional ones in December 2023. This list includes, for example, such topics as employment, housing, application for RA-citizenship, education, basic services and social status within hosting communities etc.

After 1.5 years there comes a new phase, as Armenia is going through a transition “from emergency response to long-term refugee integration”. Therefore, the current “strategy focuses on addressing the humanitarian needs of refugees while facilitating their integration into society” (MFA-UNHCR, 2024, p. 2). Although the theory of change articulated in transition vision document recognizes, that Armenia is “enabling environment and legal framework, which allows refugees to access national services and programme by Government to help refugees” (Ibid.), the reality of the desired integration, nevertheless, remains still difficult. First of all, it has to do with the difficult situation of the country. Refugees continue to face compounded challenges, “not only due to forced displacement but also from living in vulnerable communities with limited resources” (Ibid.). Therefore nowadays, a “coordinated and complementary approach” has been launched, “combining efforts from the government, UN agencies, bilateral partners, international organization, donors, development partners, and NGOs”, which “targets key areas such as protection, social protection, housing, and livelihoods and self-reliance” (Ibid.).

These difficulties can be detected also from financial data. To support the integration process, Armenia has allocated about 1% of its GDP, or 208 million USD, till October 2024. This funding should assist both humanitarian efforts and long-term refugee integration (Ibid., p. 4). Some notable areas of progress included - *Employment*: As already of April 2024, 16,300 refugees have entered the workforce, with 1,065 refugees engaged in private entrepreneurship, 212 working as teachers, and 202 employed in healthcare roles; *Housing*: The RA government has launched a five-year financial assistance program to help refugees purchase or build homes, particularly in rural areas and this initiative is expected to cost about 2 billion USD by 2029; *Healthcare*: Access to healthcare services has been prioritized, with 70,495 refugees registered till October 2024 at primary healthcare centers; *Education*: Over 80% of school-age refugee children were enrolled in school, with the Ministry of Education committing to full enrolment; *Social protection*: Eligible

refugees can apply for pensions, receive disability allowance, and specific cash assistance programme for refugees to address their specific needs (Ibid.).

The joint statement confirms that “Armenia has made notable progress in its refugee integration efforts, but several significant challenges remain, particularly in the areas of housing, employment, healthcare, and social protection” (Ibid., p. 5). These challenges are mostly tied to financial constraints and long-term structural issues:

“Housing pledge requires estimated USD 1.5 billion over five years, while employment programs need expanded market opportunities. The government aims to support 15,000 households, requiring a total investment of USD 400 million, including USD 1.5 billion in direct financial assistance and USD 500 million for interest costs over five years. This program is essential to ensure refugees have secure, long-term housing, particularly in rural and remote areas where access to services is limited” (Ibid.).

Besides that, the running “Employment programs are another key area, with some 60,000 refugees in working age, that requires to be scaled up. At the same humanitarian needs of the vulnerable refugees will need to be addressed” (Ibid.). But it is obvious that the support is not sufficient yet:

“However, the success of these programs depends on broader economic growth and market conditions, making expansion efforts critical to improving livelihoods. Healthcare access remains a challenge, especially in rural and remote areas. Social protection programs, including cash assistance for 115,000 refugees, cost USD 172.5 million annually. Additionally, pensions and disability assistance for refugees add to the financial strain” (Ibid.).

If all the accepted pledges will be taken into consideration, there should be an investment of “estimated to a total annual total of USD 615 million, which includes some support that benefit both refugees and host communities” (Ibid.). Thus, the consultation between UNHCR and RA government at the end highlights

“a strong commitment from both responsible line Ministries and international partners to support refugees through comprehensive approach. This approach focuses on improving services in key areas such as education, healthcare, economic empowerment, housing, gender equality, and protection. The goal is to enhance the well-being of both refugees and host communities, fostering integration, resilience, and social cohesion” (Ibid., 7).

The next significant international organization, which supports both refugees from NK and citizens of RA in the vulnerable or conflicting-border areas is the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Like the UNHCR it has been working in Armenia since 1992 and does vital projects in diverse humanitarian areas (ICRC, 2025a). According to their self-description, they help people “affected by armed conflict and other violence” and do everything “to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often with our Red Cross and Red Crescent partners” (ICRC, 2025a). The ICRC also wants “to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles” (Ibid.).

Therefore, the delegation of ICRC-Armenia and its local staff interacted directly “with the families of people unaccounted for in relation to the conflict escalations” and “continued implementing the Accompaniment of the Families of Missing program launched in November 2022” (Ibid.). The

program has been carried out here “based on the needs assessment of the families whose loved ones went missing in connection with the conflict escalation in 2020”. In addition, ICRC “kept providing technical and material support, including forensic expertise, to public authorities and forensic facilities to enhance preparedness and response for preventing disappearances and maximizing identification of the dead in emergencies” (Ibid.).

It was also until recently the most important institution for communication with the relatives of those Armenians from NK and RA, whose family members were imprisoned in Baku:

“[ICRC] kept visiting those detained in connection with the conflict escalations, whose detention had been confirmed by the respective authorities. During our visits, we assessed the treatment of the detainees and the conditions of their detention, as well as facilitated the exchange of news with their families. With the consent of the detaining authorities, the family contact was maintained by means of Red Cross messages, phone calls, oral greetings and/or pre-recorded video messages” (Ibid.).

Only in 2024 between January-December 557 oral, video and written Red Cross messages were exchanged between families and their relatives detained in relation to the conflict escalations. “Furthermore, the ICRC continued regular visits to individuals detained in relation to the armed conflict, to monitor the conditions of detention and treatment as well as help them maintain contact with their relatives” (Ibid.).

Moreover, the ICRC provided different types of assistance both for the short-term relief and long-term integration of Karabakh-Armenians in RA. I.e. 15,450 banking transfers were made only from January to April 2024 as part of the state program for Cash for Rent and Utility for individuals who moved to Armenia from Karabakh and resettled in Syunik, Vayots Dzor, Gegharkunik, and Tavush regions. Around 1,290 calls and individual visits were received at the ICRC delegation in Yerevan and subdelegation in Goris concerning conflict-related family separation (Ibid.).

From the information sheet presented after my academic interview with the Delegation in February 2025, can be concluded that 62 families requested ICRC support to clarify the fate and whereabouts of their missing relatives by opening tracing/human remains requests. All together 429 RA-citizens and ethnic Armenians from Karabakh (including 51 cases of precarious burials, for which the families requested ICRC facilitation in the transfer of human remains to Armenia) are still missing in relation to the escalations in 2020-2023, as per individual requests received by the ICRC from affected families. “The ICRC continues to work with the concerned authorities to facilitate the process of search and identification to help them provide answers to the respective families” (Ibid.).

Moreover, three individuals were transferred in 2024 from Karabakh to Armenia with the ICRC support. 19 sessions (four introductory, seven Right to Know/Legal, three forensic-related, five preparation sessions for awareness raising/commemoration events) were held for families of missing in seven regions of Armenia within the scope of the ICRC Accompaniment Program. Fourteen persons previously detained in relation to the conflict, benefited from individual psychological support and MHPSS group sessions. Thirty different-level military officers, contract soldiers, and non-commissioned officers from various training units of the Armenian Armed

Forces participated in a two-day train-the-trainer course discussing the challenges of international humanitarian law (IHL) in contemporary armed conflicts. Fourteen middle and high-ranking military lawyer officers from different units of the MoD participated in the IHL integration training related to the role of legal advisers in modern armies. Forty-eight officers and non-commissioned officers of the Border Guard Troops of the National Security Service learned about the ICRC mandate and activities and IHL basics during workshops in Goris and Kapan, Syunik region (Ibid.).

According to many Armenian prisoners released from Baku, “the visits of ICRC members in their cells were the only glimpses of lights in those dark days” (Arakelyan, 2021). They were getting proper food, medical assistance and were not tortured for a couple of days in advance for a showoff session before the appearance of ICRC-Delegation members (Ibid.). However, such hypocritic hearings didn’t disturb the imprisoned Armenians so much, because during such visits they were able to call their relatives or send them letters (Ibid.). Therefore, now it is unclear who will take care of the remaining hostages from NK and prisoners of war, who are still in Baku, or who is going to help those Armenians remaining in Stepanakert. Eventually, who is going to search for the missing people or at least their bodies, if the ICRC isn’t allowed to function in that country anymore? In such a miserable context the perspective of a possible return to NK should become incrementally smaller or disappear altogether. However, the target group has different views on this query.

7. Historical identity and new reality from the perspective of Karabakh-Armenians

Compared to other historical regions of Armenia, with the exclusion of only some parts of Syunik, the population of this mountainous area had (had?) remained almost unchanged in its cultural and spiritual uniqueness for ages. It is historically proven, that the ancestors of Karabakh-Armenians have been living there for more than two thousand years (Müller et. all., 2024). Compared to other provinces of Great Armenia in antiquity, or the Bagratid-Armenia in the Middle Ages, or the first independent Republic of Armenia between 1918-1921 and the Soviet Republic of Armenia between 1921-1991, where several foreign invasions/influences and internal migrations took place, NK remained as one of the unique examples of high degree of homogeneity. Due to its geographical location, as a natural fortress, the local Armenians could hide, organize resistance and protect themselves from foreign aggressors (Ter-Ghevondian, 2024, 48-50). But this mountainous area became also hardly reachable for the compatriots from other regions, i.e. during or after World War I. Although there was never any closed border between Armenia and NK until recent tragic events and the blockade of NK between December 2022 – September 2023, its hilly terrain remained somehow isolated because of the difficult and long journeys. Therefore, it stayed without any big waves of Armenian refugees or repats, which was contrary the case almost with every corner of East-Armenia during the Tsarist Russian Empire due to Russian-Persian and Russian-Turkish wars, the Sultan Hamid’s massacres in the Ottoman Empire, the Genocide of 1915, or the organized repatriation by communists from historical diaspora after the World War II. These refugees brought with themselves their customs and dialects to all other parts of RA and influenced the local mentality.

Hence, Karabakh-Armenians kept continuously their original lifestyle according to their own traditions. Only during the Soviet regime, after the arbitrary and high-handed proclamation of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), which took place without any democratic referendum, the government of Soviet AZ could close all churches there, resolved the Diocese of Artsakh and demolished some of the Christian traditions by actively changing also the local demography (Shakaryan, 2024, 88-90). According to the author, who was the vicar of the Diocese of Artsakh, despite those anti-religious and anti-Armenian seven decades, the culture of the indigenous population remained almost unbreakably chained with the past narratives and century-long memories. Also, their special dialect was still connected with the Old Armenian-Grabar (Ibid.).

However, their religiosity became mixed with some homemade Oriental-Orthodox rites and ancient Pre-Christian traditions or superstitions. That is why their medieval monasteries and churches are still devoted in the same way as the ancient pagan shrines and holy trees, such as the famous Tnjri tree by Skhtorashen village (Wondermondo - Wondes of the World, 2014). According to the local dialect *tnjri* means just a ‘plane tree’. There are many such devoted giant trees, but the one in Skhtorashen is regarded as the most popular one in NK. Locals believe that even St. Mesrop Mashtots, the creator of the Armenian alphabet and the founder of the first Armenian church school at the monastery of Amaras, visited the tree. Therefore, every year thousands of Armenians did their pilgrimage to this or other similar natural shrines to do with their families the ancient service of *matagh* (Arm. syncretic ritual of pagan animal-offering and Christian agape fest for the poor and needy ones). This is the cultural narrative that the Karabakh-Armenians believe in till today.

In this constellation, it was not surprising that all questions on the integration of these people into the society of RA were answered negatively during several academic interviews which were conducted between January-February 2025 with representatives of the Diocese of Armenian Apostolic Church of Artsakh, Ministry of Education of NK and AMSAR NGO from Stepanakert.

During a conversation with Bishop Vrtanes Abrahamyan, primate of Artsakh Diocese, he made the following remarks: “The government of RA didn’t organize the acceptance of forcibly displaced people appropriately, despite previous experiences with Armenian refugees from Syria, Baku, Sumgait, and Kirovabad” (Interview with V.A. from January 25, 2025). According to him, the “official side has created this chaos with purpose”, because “they didn’t want us to be in the same place but spread all over the country”. From the previous 308 administrative communities, which were registered in NK, only one, the Mushkapat village, could be settled together in the region of Lori. “But this happened only because of the self-organization of this people and thanks to the support of MOONQ Technoschool-Foundation, which was also created by the residents of Artsakh”. In all other cases “the previous lifestyle is completely destroyed and there is no possibility for the integration but rather an emigration to foreign countries”. Although the parliament of NK, which regards itself as “a government in exile” now, organizes some gatherings in the former building of the consulate of Artsakh in Yerevan at Nairi Zaryan Street 17/2, however “they stand under the pressure from the government of RA and can’t do any serious actions”. Even the Diocese of Artsakh could not be re-registered here as an official institution, but since it is still

recognized by the Armenian-Apostolic Church, “it remains as the only uniting legal institution for every Artsakh-Armenian”. Thanks to the donations from the diaspora, his diocese rents an office and a small hall in Yerevan since October 2024.

On the question about the evaluation of the current process of integration, Bishop Vrtanes answers:

“It goes very bad. Besides some former state officers from NK or those who could work in the local ministerium, no one wants to get the RA-citizenship really and doesn’t believe in the program with housing certificates. There is only a small support with rental and utility costs, but no proper psychological help. Our professionals are not included in the respective fields. Instead of that we hear constantly the artificial usage of such terms as ‘*gharabaghtsi* against *hayastantsi*’ (residents from NK vs RA), which bring tension and separation. Moreover, there are strong efforts conducted by the current government of RA against our legitimate demands on the return to Artsakh”.

Concerning the positive characteristics and special qualities of Karabakh-Armenians, which could be useful in RA, the primate states:

“We have a distinctive culture, which is several thousand years old. It includes such customs as having many children and taking care of our big families. Therefore, we have longed for our existence for centuries. In contrary to the postmodern and egocentric attitude of many residents of Yerevan, Artsakh-Armenians keep their collective values and group mentality. They want to serve their motherland. Most of these people weren’t rich at all, nevertheless they were happy in their rural houses with modest gardens and domestic animals. Our academics had strong affiliation towards sciences. Our grandparents and parents were very good soldiers in the army. There was always a common tendency of serving in the military as contracted officers, which, unfortunately, isn’t handled appropriately in the RA now”.

In concern of the future perspective bishop states:

“There was a crime against international law. The total blockade was called an ‘eco-activism’. But even an unaided human eye could detect what was happening with Artsakh. Actually, all international norms were violated. At the end there was a genocide, which took place in the presence of Russian peacekeepers. This all has happened before our eyes. Therefore, the international organizations should invite to an inquiry those Russian officers, who were responsible for the protection of our people. And together with these international organizations we shall achieve the restoration of justice. In order to do that, we need our flag and the government of Artsakh as a legitim petitioner. Our people do not accept the resolvent of our state [NK] by just one signature and there is neither such a law in the constitution of Artsakh, which would aloud to a president to quite this country. Therefore, the leadership of Armenian Church supports the government of Artsakh and wants to save it with all costs. We have hope and vision about returning home, and we can’t let this hope be lost. Hence, we can’t lose our identity and our collectivity. If we will continue to work together, then sooner or later we will go back and live again in Artsakh”.

In the same way the process of integration was criticized by the former vicar of the Diocese of Artsakh and abbot of St. Gandzasar monastery, archimandrite Sahak Shakaryan, who serves now as the abbot of St. Tatev monastery in the region of Syunik. According to him “it is a very hard process, and we can hardly call it an integration, because there is too much pain in the hearts of our people” (Interview with S.S. from January 25, 2025). In NK, they lived near each other and could often visit their big families and friends. There is a special word in their dialect *nigyan*,

which means compassion or active participation in the grief of close ones. “Here in RA, we don’t see that much. People can’t visit their relatives so often, although they want to support each other.” In his observation, it is easier for Karabakh-Armenians to stay in Syunik, which has a similar dialect, cuisine and comparable traditions.

“Some people want to stay here to see at least the mountains of Artsakh on the Eastern horizon. However, the danger of another military attack from Azerbaijan is omnipresent in Syunik. Therefore, and due to the difficulties with the local job market, not so many people want to settle down in this area really and are enforced to migrate towards Yerevan or the northern regions of RA”.

The former NK Minister of Culture, Lernik Hovhannisyan, who works now as a researcher at Yerevan State University, assesses the efforts of the government of RA also as insufficient. According to him, it is impossible to keep their unique dialect and cultural characteristics in the long run, if they do not stay together in the same area (Interview with L.H. from January 25, 2025). “If all NGO’s, church parishes and cultural institutions are resolved, like the theatre of Artsakh, then our people have no chance of keeping their identity for the long term. The government of the RA prevented our homogenic settlement, except for only one single case.” Concerning the difficult relationship between RA and NK governments he states:

“For the government of the RA the term ‘Artsakh’ has become a tabu now. Besides that, there is enormous pressure upon the parliamentary delegates of NK. If there is any protest from this side, then the building of former NK-consulate will be taken from them”.

Even the common idea with Catholicos of All Armenians, Karekin II, to create a museum for the history of Artsakh in St. Etchmiadzin, was rejected by the state:

“His Holiness was ready to give us one of the buildings in the monastic complex and many people were ready to donate their antiquaries and relics, which had been kept in their families for generations. However, the fears of the accusations and threats by Ilham Aliyev have probably stopped the administrative officials. They didn’t allow us to have at least a small gallery in St. Etchmiadzin, which we could see in cases of the Musa Dagh and Sardarapat museums even during the Soviet regime.”

According to him the ordinary people don’t understand these tensions: “Many of them want to leave the country, but they can’t get a Schengen visa with their 070-coded passports. They don’t understand also how their RA citizenship could be taken away so easily. That was absolutely an illegal decision.” Concerning future developments, Hovhannisyan argues:

“There is a strong hope about returning to our homes. Therefore, we need to stay in the RA and not immigrate to foreign countries. To leave Armenia means also to bury Artsakh. However, we shouldn’t dissolve here but rather keep our identity and continue to struggle for our demands. The future residency in NK will be possible, but only under the protection of international peacekeepers, like it was in case of Kosovo”.

The representatives of AMSAR NGO from Stepanakert, Anush Avanesyan and David Pashayan complained that they could not do their social work here immediately after displacement, because their charitable organization needed re-registration in RA according to the local law (Interviews

with A.A. and D.P. from January 26, 2025). After conducting extended interviews with 769 families (as of January 2025), which means more than 4,000 people, their statistics show that 42% of displaced people wished to speak with clergy or psychologists about their traumatic experiences and 86% wanted to return to NK. During their diverse projects on social-psychological rehabilitation and spiritual counseling, they faced several mental issues by their beneficiaries concerning the difficulties between previous and current contexts. Many of them mourn about lost family members and the impossibility of going to their graves, which are demolished now by the Azeri military. Some of them cannot even go to the local churches, because “they could speak with Him only in their familiar church at their own village” in NK. Others are angry against God, because “He didn’t protect them from this disaster and let them leave their homeland”.

Another former NK-Minister of Education, who later was de facto NK-president Arayik Harutyunyan’s adviser, Lusine Gharakhanyan works now as a museum director and psychologist in Yerevan. She confirms that there are huge mental problems which are hindering the integration of Karabakh-Armenians in the RA (Interview with L.G. from April 11, 2025). She instructs since 2022 the project *Paradise Family*, which is financed by Bread for the World foundation from Germany and conducts social and psychological counseling of young families from NK. According to her, there are many issues which hinder the integration of these target group in RA.

“First of all, it is our different dialect, which is connected also with our different mentality. Then the contrast between our former landscape and strong attachment with previous psychological condition. The posttraumatic symptoms are not overcome yet. Our people get in Armenia several trainings, i.e. for the development of business plans, but the professional support with psychological rehabilitation is conducted only in few cases and very partially. Many people from rural areas do not even understand what is happening inside them and where they can get help for such serious emotional pain. Instead of that, they are looking again at destructive videos on social media about the demolishment of their homes and the online mobbing of Azeri bloggers. This transfers them much deeper into negative feelings and often ends up with such mental disorders as middle and major level depression. When the impossibility of returning to our destroyed houses is realized finally, then we experience total helplessness and inadequacy with the present moment. There were already six cases of suicide and many other cases of natural deaths in young ages, due to the different health issues, such as heart attacks. The problem is that there are neither real studies on our different identities nor on the current field of psychological adaptation. These should be developed from scratch. However, it should be done not only by the representatives of the state but rather by the committees of independent experts. Otherwise, the material and moral support will remain only as a partial approach for us and the process of integration will still last for many more decades.”

Thus, she admits that the government of the RA has organized general social support. However, “there were no specific state programs aimed at integration” and the project provided for psychological support “were just fragmented and did not include those families who are settled in border communities”. Also, “there are no programs for the preservation of intangible and non-material cultural heritage that would contribute to the development of our communal continuity”. Therefore,

“people face here high levels of despair, depression, and anxiety. These symptoms are present in all age groups. As parents are transmitters and, whether they like it or not, they also pass on their

stressful background, experiences, and emotions to their children. After the forced displacement, more than thirty thousand children found themselves far from their birthplace, their native kindergarten and school. Children are the most vulnerable group among the forcibly displaced. Because of being dialect speakers, they found themselves in different environments, in which they can only speak the mother-dialect with their relatives at home. The change of environment has had a very serious impact on their psychological state. Many underage children now diabetes. And the teenagers, like their parents, almost everyday witness terrible videos on the Internet about merciless attacks and destruction of cultural objects in their native village or city, which make them suffer seriously afterwards”.

Gharakhanyan calls this “the second stage of terrorism that the forcibly displaced people of NK have to overcome”. Therefore,

“more comprehensive psychological support programs are needed that will contribute to the integration of Artsakh residents”. Consequently, “in this post-war situation, the role of identity, social unity, the creation of a stable community and a sense of continuity is very important. Moreover, all international conventions and other legal systems seem to protect their intangible cultural heritage only partially and indirectly. And in this regard, the people of Artsakh, as well as many post-conflict and post-war communities, have an acute demand for human rights protection in the international system and the recognition of their trauma”. Concerning the best solution she affirms, that she is more that sure, “if international peacekeepers will bring us to our homeland, then most of our people will have not the same house as before but they will be healthy again in their hearts”.

In this context it becomes clear why Karabakh-Armenians could not admit the recent declaration of Nikol Pashinyan about “not continuing the Karabakh-movement anymore” (Armenpress, 2025). Moreover, it becomes also obvious that due to so many resentments and complaints most of these traumatized people would stand up for their rights and protest one day, like they did, starting from March 29, 2025 (Hetq, 2025). The almost forgotten issue by the official sources about integration of this target group became suddenly on the list of the top ten news and public discussions at the beginning of April 2025.

Der Teil 7 basiert ja zum Großteil auf Einzelinterviews. An einer Stelle wird aber eine umfassende Studie genannt. Ich fände es als Leser sehr interessant zu sehen, inwiefern die anekdotischen Aussagen der qualitativen Interviews auch messbaren Niederschlag in quantitativen Umfragen finden. Da ist natürlich die große Frage die Repräsentativität.

8. Opinions on the current challenges from the perspective of hosting communities

As mentioned at the end of previous chapter, the questions on the (de-)integration of Karabakh-Armenians in the RA are actively discussed now both in public debates and in social media. The following arguments towards / about NK-Armenians from within RA-society are used and repeated by most of the critics, whom I have interviewed:

- a) NK-residents were not treating our soldiers properly before; b) RA-Armenians were the ones who were supporting them both militarily and financially, but the elite of NK remained corrupted and selfish; c) Most of their politicians and military officials came together with Robert Kocharyan as dictators to RA and remained here occupants, who did not pay the taxes and enriched themselves

with illegal methods; d) They did not accept the government of Nikol Pashinyan and are sabotaging him since 2018; e) The generals of NK defense army did not fight properly in the last Karabakh-war and betrayed our troops; f) They do not want to get a RA-citizenship now in order to remain as refugees and receive welfare; g) Also they do not apply for the RA-citizenship, because they do not want to send their sons to the compulsory military service; h) They do not want to find jobs, because they are used to the subsidized high salaries from NK and do not want to work 'like us' with ordinary payments; i) They are pro-Russian and support the previous regime, who is supported by Kreml and organizes an uprising against current government; j) Most of their former rulers and administrative workers are very rich people and have expensive real estate or even businesses in RA.

This list with accusations could be for sure continued further. Although the hosting communities made a remarkable effort to accept this target group and solved their immediate material needs in the best way, we see that there is a lack of mutual understanding due to the old stereotypes and new blames.

Archbishop Abraham Mkrtchyan is one of the most engaged hierarchs of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the social sector. He is the primate of Vayots Dzor diocese and founder of the Community Development NGO (former Syunik NGO), which was established in 1995. His initiative started because of the First Karabakh-War. Since then, among other important things, it deals with the consequences of wars and armed border escalations, which leave a huge number of affected people in this area - the closest one to NK and neighboring to Nakhichevan. During the last Karabakh-war in fall 2020 and after the ethnic cleansing of Armenians from NK, this diocese and NGO conduct multidimensional caritative projects and emergency programs, such as refugee shelters in the Siranush Youth Camp. They supported thousands of violently displaced people in cooperation with diaspora, Armenian and international partnering funds, such as Bread for the World and Renovabis from Germany or HEKS/EPER from Switzerland. In my conversations, archbishop Abraham and Ani Smbatyan, the president of NGO, stress out several problematic issues and resentments, which negatively affect the proper reception of Karabakh-Armenians by the local population and therefore disrupt or delay the successful integration (Interviews with A.M and A.S. from December 25, 2025).

According to their observations, there are many negative stereotypes within local societies. There are also accusations concerning the pro-Russian attitude of former NK-government or also in general NK-residents, which corresponds also to the current disloyalty towards RA-institutions. In that sense, one of the most important issues in the minds of local people at Vayots Dzor is the "betrayal" of many high-ranking officers from the NK-Defense Army, who didn't really combat in fall 2020 but on the contrary were sabotaging the troops. According to them, that was done with purpose, "in order to lose the war and let the Russian military come in as so called 'peacekeepers'". Immediately after the Second Karabakh-War there were several reports from the frontline that instead of doing their duties and standing appropriately on the head of their units, many military commanders convinced their sub-officers, regular soldiers, and volunteers to give up their positions and retreat. There were many witnesses, which have heard that allegedly "this isn't their war anymore, because Nikol Pashinyan has already sold these territories". Therefore, in the end "they not only sabotaged their fighters but left them often alone without leadership and

communication, which resulted in the loss of several important battles, the takeover of strategic positions, high numbers of casualties, damage of expensive military technique, capture of POWs and civil hostages, and, finally, the loss of the historical land”.

Archbishop Abraham and Smbatyan quote, that similar question (why didn't they fight and defend their homeland properly?) is asked by their locals till now about the last combats in NK on September 19-20, 2023. Many local citizens

“don't understand why the army of Artsakh and the contracted members of territorial protection resisted for only 24 hours? Why could all of them agree with the ceasefire so quickly by giving up everything to Azeris and capitulating? Why didn't they stay for example as the heroes of Musa Dagh during the Genocide in Ottoman Empire? Why didn't they protect their homeland with honor till the last drop of their blood? And why didn't their responsible officers or politicians commit suicide but let them capture and humiliate in the prison and court of Baku? Later, when the media in AZ was spreading the videos on the war trophies with Armenian weapons, many polarized voices started to spread such rumors, that supposedly the gharabaghtsi didn't fight for their land at all and therefore they eventually received from God what they deserved”.

The problem is that till recently only some law-ranking military personnel have been charged officially for their “betrayal”. Although there is an “Inquiry Committee for Studying the Circumstances of the Hostilities Unleashed on September 27, 2020”, which works already for more than four years, the charges against high-ranking officers and generals started just a few months ago and there are no court decisions yet.

“Most of the open cases remain unknown to the public instead, which fosters the spread of new rumors on subterranean conspiracies. On the example with this single topic, we can see how difficult it is for the local population to overcome the inner hatred and accept their compatriots from Artsakh with open hearts and hands”.

However, my researched sources show, that there is also another, although part of local society, which continues to support morally the Karabakh-Armenians and encourages especially their right on return. To this group belongs notably the leadership of Armenian Apostolic Church. Therefore, the Armenian high-ranking clergy has been accused often by Baku for their so called ‘revanchism’. In his last Christmas message Catholicos Karekin II states on this: “Our nation has endured severe trials: NK was seized and depopulated; sovereign territories of Armenia remain occupied; many of our sons are still in captivity or missing; new demands and threats continue to be expressed by Azerbaijan. Internally, our homeland is plagued by falsehoods, lawlessness, malice, vengeance, and corrupt course, which breed mistrust, indifference, hostility, and division in our society, causing weakening to the nation. Alongside these challenges, the distortion of Christian moral perception and our traditional national spiritual values threatens our identity, weakens our national spirit, and ensnares us in the traps of sin and despair” (Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, 2025). Therefore, he suggests: “Let us unite for the unwavering security and strength of our state, for justice for our forcibly displaced brothers and sisters from Artsakh, and for the safe and prosperous perpetuation of our nation and homeland [...]. Let us ask the Almighty Lord's support for the people of Artsakh, who have suffered great losses and have been driven from their ancestral land”

(Ibid.). This attitude brings of course separation between the church and state, because the government of RA intends to remain on the peacemaking truck.

In the same way several high-ranking hierarchy and parish priests are from time to time reminding their believers about this topic. However, the two most prominent voices of this ecclesiastic-political movement are, first, the former primate of the diocese of Tavush, archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, whose primacy rights was temporary frozed for the delegation of antigovernmental street protests. In many public statements he called himself the “chosen leader by God and by nation” (see for example his YouTube - @SrbazanPaykar or Telegram - t.me/srbazan_payqar channels). In reality, he started the demonstrations against the delimitation of the borderline between RA and AZ in Spring 2024 by promising to his followers that they are going to reconquest NK starting from the uprising against the local police in Voskepar to taking the power in Yerevan and, finally, to rescuing even the historical territories of “Western Armenia”. Second, the primate of Shirak diocese, archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan, who gives now many interviews to different media sources by developing his own political theology and putting the whole responsibility of the loss of NK on the “sinfulness of our nation”. According to him this theological idea gives him the right for calling for the counterrevolution against current government of the RA and the demolishment of all democratic structures. In one of his last interviews, where he supports the opposition during the municipal elections of Gyumri, he criticizes the current leaders with following words: “These people have no shame [Arm. *anamot mardik*] [...] They call it their victory, when they are giving up Artsakh [...] They call it victory when Artsakh is cleansed from Armenians and they call it victory when Azeri troops are entering to Armenia”. At the same time, he makes a contractionary statement: “I am not participating in the process of opposition, because I am a church leader and have lot of things to do, but I am supporting our opposition.”

9. (Sub-)Conclusion and future perspectives

Although there were many publications on this topic through the end of 2023 and first half of 2024, most of them did not properly deal with the issues of integration but rather concentrated on the tragic displacement and problems of immediate support (CFT Justice, 2023). Afterwards there are not so many profound studies about the new life-chapter of Karabakh-Armenians. An exception is the paper of Ivaylo Dinev & Nadja Douglas on the political future of this target group, where the authors also rise the following issue: “But besides the question of material support, what are the consequences for the Karabakh Armenians’ political and cultural identity since they were uprooted from their native land? This topic has so far mostly flown under the radar of international observers, most of the focus being on the group’s integration into mainstream Armenian society.” (Dinev/Douglas, 2025, 4-5). Conversely, even the latest local sources did not provide much information on most of the questions which were raised in the introduction. It seemed like a general pre-agreed silence on this topic until the end of March 2025, when the Prime Minister of the RA suggested for the first time to forget completely about Karabakh movement, which triggered Karabakh-Armenians to start demonstrations for their basic rights and other existential questions connected with their regional identity.

In different conversations with representatives from Armenian NGOs between January-March 2025, it became clear that they had similar problems by gathering of actual information and statistics on Karabakh-Armenians from the responsible state institutions. Even some of my university peers had the same issues and concluded that ‘there should be direct orders from above with internal restrictions, which did not allow ministries and executive departments to speak about this target group openly or share actual data anymore’.

Concerning the future perspectives, one must understand that there is a big dichotomy: most of the displaced people are starting from scratch but their elite has already both real estate and huge businesses in Yerevan. As mentions one of my international interview partners, who works with NK-Armenians but expressed a wish to talk only off-record, often the expectations are too high, because some of them think that they may settle down quickly and get stability very soon. However, from other similar refugee situations in the world the experts involved know that in the best case it takes around 2-5 years for the proper resettlement and resocialization. But on average it takes between 5-10 years for appropriate rehabilitation and integration. And it must be also admitted that there are such difficult cases when some individuals continue to suffer emotionally throughout their whole life. For the last cases, entire generations may remain mentally and technically as refugees till the rest of their lives. Therefore, it is very important to study their previous conditions, regional identity and understand their perceptions of the current situation. If they continue to suffer because of the loss of their home and still deal with the trauma of leaving their dead relatives and friends in Karabakh, then it would be very hard for them to accept the new reality and integrated here.

I asked also the same interview partner what would be the best-case expectations of integration in percentage? And his answer was: usually around 25% of refugees are making it in two years. 50% are struggling in such situations quite long and need psychological support. And the last 25%, who don’t have realistic expectations, remain in this condition of grief till the end of their life and never recover from this trauma.

In the case of the RA, it could be concluded that there are no clear criteria for the evaluation of the process of integration. Sure, there is a compact list of priorities which was accepted also by the government in 2016 and revitalized with 7 new pledges in 2019, later on – with 6 additional ones in December 2023. This list includes such topics as a) employment, b) housing, c) application for the RA-citizenship, e) education, f) basic services, and g) social status within hosting communities etc. But it is obvious that there is a big lack in communication between governmental institutions and the forcibly displaced people who stay especially in psychological need. For example, the residents of NK, who had already a RA-passport before, do not understand why it is not regarded as a RA-citizenship anymore? Of course, this might be called a ‘conventional passport’, and it is not a unique case in the world. For example the government of India has granted similar passports without any rights on citizenship to the refugees from Tibet. And there are also other comparable examples, but they are not explained to the refugees from NK properly.

It was of course important to grant temporary protection to these people and give them legal status, since they were endangered by becoming stateless. Therefore, after their arrival to the RA at the end of September 2023 and till October 26, 2023, when the official decree on their legal status was

proclaimed, the international organizations worked very closely with the RA government by assisting on this issue as much as necessary. The displaced people from NK have now the fast-track possibility for the application of the RA-citizenship. But there are still many problems related to all necessary information on this matter. There are such questions like: What about those residents from NK that came here after the last war in fall 2020 and stayed in Armenia afterwards? Why didn't they get any official status for their protection then? And why were many of them forced to leave the Republic of Armenia? The official answers on this vary. But the logical explanation could be that the situation between the last war and the final displacement in September 2023 was different, because they still had some place left in the main part of NK where they could return as residents, if they would like to. Therefore, no new status was needed in those days in comparison with the later total displacement where the territories of NK were completely lost, and all administrative institutions were resolved.

But which are the challenges that remain and what could be the future perspective of the integrational process? This research has shown that there was strong political will and intention by the RA government to overcome this crisis in the optimal way possible. Also, the acceptance of this target group within local communities is very high, despite many regional stereotypes and negative narratives from the past. However, there is a big difference in the levels of grieving, because the dignity of these people was hurt tremendously, just like that of most refugees in the world who are losing their homeland. Of course, there are many programs which are carried out by local institutions, NGOs and other international partners to support them and solve their needs. But there is also a big difference between the annual financial means, which could be spent here for their support in comparison with the expected ones. So, between October 2023 – October 2024, Armenia has allocated 208 million USD, which is about 1% of its GDP. This funding assisted both humanitarian efforts and long-term refugee integration. However, the list of all agreed pledges altogether estimates to a total annual of 615 million USD (see chapter 6), which includes some support that benefits both the refugees and the host communities. Therefore, it becomes clear that if only one-third of the positions can be covered within a year, then this process is going to be much longer as expected on average, lasting approximately five years.

Moreover, there may also be other developments concerning geopolitical and regional challenges that, along with the turbulence and changes of the local economic market, will certainly influence this process. The territorial location of Armenia is not an easy one; therefore, as any international respondent and many other European politicians suggest, the best solution to overcome this task could be probably a Transcaucasian reconciliation and cooperation between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia with a common vision towards peaceful future. It would probably resemble a 'Mini-Caucasian-EU'. However, there is not much hope left for this goal, since not only Azerbaijan but also other countries in the neighborhood have different agendas on this possible scenario.

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