

Demographic Consequences of Conflicts in Georgia

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Georgia, a republic of the Soviet Union until the USSR's dissolution in 1991, is an ethnically diverse country in the Southern Caucasus. With the help of active migration processes and especially of emigration, Georgia is involved in international migration of global kind and, according to its scales, takes part in formulating a so-called "migrant nation" characteristic for the modern world. It should be stressed that due to the profitable geopolitical location and pleasant natural and climate conditions, Georgia has never been characterized as a country with intensive external migration processes; whilst there was no particular need for people to go abroad to improve their living conditions. During the Soviet period ethnic Georgians tended to remain in Georgia, more than 95% of them lived on the own territory, while other Caucasian ethnics already in that time used to live in different Soviet republics. Migration of ethnic Georgians was primarily within the republic, towards the capital Tbilisi. However, social-economic crisis of the beginning of 1990s and ethno-political conflicts have caused unprecedented scales of emigration.

At the beginning of 90s Georgia was confronted with dramatic civil wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which brought large flows of internal and external migration. These two territories have remained outside the control of the central government and been ruled by the de-facto, unrecognized governments, supported by Russia. Emigration from South Ossetia was quite significant. It has become massive since 1991, when political conflict emerged on the territory of former Autonomous region of South Ossetia. Although Ossetians had made up only three percent of the 1989 population, they began fight against Georgian troops and finally with the help of Russia proclaimed the independence of South Ossetia in 1994, when Georgia was weakened after Abkhazian war and internal political troubles. In Abkhazia's case, the ethnic Abkhaz population also resented Georgian rule and sought independence (which has never been recognized). Abkhazians made up a total of 1.8 percent of the population of Georgia in 1989, and, with almost all members of ethnic groups living in Abkhazia, made up only 17.8 percent of the population of the region. The conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia resulted in the displacement of about a quarter of a million people within Georgia. Unfortunately, those events were accompanied by worsened statistical recording of migration and demographic events.

According to the Ministry of Refugees and Displacement of Georgia, before the new conflict 2008, about 210234 internally displaced persons have been registered from Abkhazia and 12496 persons from South Ossetia. But according to the last population census 2002, there were 161,802 internally displaced persons (IDP), out of which 55.0% are women and 45.0% are men. 73.0% of them are urban residents. 98.9% of IDPs in Georgia are ethnic Georgians. However, many IDPs living abroad at that time were not included in the census. Situation changed dramatically a month ago. The conflict in South Ossetia repeated once again, but this time Russia was openly fighting against Georgia.

The 2008 South Ossetia war was a land, air and sea fight between Georgia on the one hand, and the separatist regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the Russian Federation, on the other. Russian soldiers occupied the territories outside the conflict. Russia's invasion inflicted massive damage to the economy, infrastructure, and environment of Georgia. The Russian army has significantly destroyed the country's transport, energy, administrative, social, and civilian infrastructure, as well as has caused significant environment damage. Their actions have inflicted severe damage to the property of hundreds of Georgian and foreign companies, and to the houses and flats of thousands of civilians. Russian military planes intentionally set fire to large swathes of Georgia's forests, resulting in a major environmental catastrophe (about 1000 hectares of forests and national parks are burnt in southwestern Georgia, outside the conflict area.) and the potential loss of crucial natural assets, including endemic species. The destruction by Russia took place beyond the conflict zone, often close to Tbilisi. Russian military jets were bombing not only South Ossetian region, but entire Georgia, including the main Port of Poti on the Black Sea, which is the main link on the TRACECA East-West transport corridor that handles cargo between Europe, Central Asia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Besides Poti, Russian troops and Abkhazian bands occupied also Upper Abkhazia, the only territory of Abkhazia controlled by the Georgians.

Following the conflict, Russia withdrew most of its forces, but thousands of Russian troops still remain in Georgia that Russia claims to be a peacekeeping. A precise assessment of damage can only be made after the Russian Army fully withdraws.

Figures based on information gathered by the Georgian government and the UN refugee agency show that the total number of people displaced by the recent conflict over the South Ossetia breakaway region stood at 192,000.

The latest statistics, based on detailed profiling of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Georgia, break down the number of displaced into 127,000 people in Georgia proper, 30,000 within South Ossetia and another 35,000 to North Ossetia in the Russian Federation.

Earlier UNHCR estimates had put the total number of displaced at 158,000. But this failed to take into account many people who had been staying with host families in Georgia. Of the 127,000 IDPs in Georgia, 68,000 have since returned home. UNHCR and the Georgian government estimate that another 5,000 will go home before the onset of winter, raising the number of returnees to 73,000.

As for the remaining 54,000 IDPs, UNHCR estimates that 23,000 will need to be provided with alternative shelter through the winter months, but will be able to return home in 2009 once their houses have been rehabilitated. However, the remaining 31,000 individuals are not expected to return in the foreseeable future.

They originate from South Ossetia (22,000); from inaccessible parts of the so-called buffer zone between Georgia and South Ossetia (8,000); and from Abkhazia (1,000). Given that Georgia is already hosting 223,000 IDPs from previous conflicts, this new population will result in the longer term in Georgia having a total of 254,000 IDPs.

As for refugees of other countries, there has been an inflow of refugees to Georgia. According to the General Population Census of 2002, besides the IDPs in Georgia, there were identified 3751 of other refugees. The vast majority of them (3683 persons, i.e. 98.2%) have come from nearby foreign countries, including 3327 persons, i.e. 88.7% from the Russian Federation. Majority of them returned to their countries or departed to other European countries. According to the official data of Ministry of Refugees and Displacement, by the year 2006, 1320 refugees are registered in Georgia. They are mainly from the Chechen Republic (Russian Federation). At the moment they are settled mostly in Pankisi Gorge (Eastern Georgia).

So today there are the following categories of emigrants in Georgia:

I. Internal migrants:

- Who left their homes as a result of ecological catastrophes (avalanche, landslide, inundation, and earthquake) and moved to other places, i.e. ecological migrants, 31341 families.

- Internally displaced persons as a result of conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

- Refugees

- II. External migrants:

- International labour emigrants, departed legally or illegally.

- Transit migrants.

- Refugees from Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

- Asylum seekers abroad.

- Deported people during the Second World War – Turk Meskhetians (During World War II, about 120000 Meskhetians were exiled from Georgia to Central Asia, as part of Stalin's policy "unreliable" ethnic groups. Today, many of survivors and their descendants are seeking to return to their country).

Numerical indicators of each category of migrants are not always defined and their exact figures are not known, that's why it's difficult to observe the tendencies and make their analysis.

It should be indicated that existing net migration in Georgia will remain negative till 2030. We assume so not only on the basis of the held researches in Georgia, but such prognosis is also offered by UN and Georgian experts. According to their evaluation, the net migration will remain negative till 2030 – in 2000-2030 Georgia will loose 320 000 humans with the help of natural income, and 603 000 human as a result of external migration, in other words it's expected that Georgia will loose about 1 million people. Thus, external migration will remain a central problem for Georgia not only at present time, but during the nearest 20 years, especially now, when there is a new conflict in the country.

The results of this war are terrible for the demographic development of Georgia. Firstly, many people are killed and many are wounded. Thousands of new IDP appeared. Majority of them will not marry and have children due to the economic difficulties. Stress that the whole population of Georgia underwent will cause increase of mortality and will spread a fear of future among young population that as a result will prevent increase of birth rate in the country. Majority of young people and especially IDP will postpone family creation for the better future. If such situation continues for a long time, the UN prognosis will be actually realized. It should be indicated that if 1980-s 94000 children were born on average annually, now number of new-born children reduced till 47795. Such situation is importantly caused by emigration processes where the half of the women at the age of 20-29 participates. They are the healthiest, youngest and the most capable part of Georgians, who had to improve the demographic condition of the country.

In the paper we should analyze the impact of this conflict on the demographic development of Georgia, for example, its impact on birth rate, mortality and marriage rates and of course on migration processes, also their health, social, economic conditions. The proposed study will attempt to examine the size and current location of IDPs as well as their health outcomes and specific needs in Georgia. The main contribution of the proposed study will be to provide guidance for the development of a coherent IDP policy, addressing return, resettlement and reintegration.

The research will be based on the official statistical materials, on different quantitative and qualitative resources, including statistical yearbooks, censuses, surveys and the information

data provided by Georgian and foreign experts. It is planned to conduct the special research to investigate new demographic behavior of Internally Displaced Persons.