

# Social Transformations in Post-Soviet Nagorno Karabakh

## Motivations for Migration

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 38

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*August 2008*

In this memo I compare Soviet and post-Soviet migration from Nagorno Karabakh, describe how people migrated and for what reasons, and analyze the pressures people from the region faced after the collapse of the USSR. The findings stem from research I conducted in the town of Martuni, a small district center in Nagorno Karabakh, with a population of approximately 5,000. Additionally, I interviewed economic migrants from the region who now reside in Moscow and other large Russian cities, such as Krasnodar.

I find that in contrast to Soviet migration, post-Soviet migration has essentially been a survival strategy. The most powerful motivations for migration are linked to post-*perestroika* changes in the structure of former Soviet societies. The greatest migration flows began at the end of the 1980s as a result of Moscow's weakening influence and an increase in separatism, which was accompanied by bloody interethnic and sociopolitical conflicts. The social context of migration in the region researched can be described in terms of a crisis situation: a post-war society in complete economic crisis with mass unemployment and poverty.

Against a background of extreme social polarization, several strata of the population found themselves on the brink of destitution, especially women. The feminization of poverty is directly linked to the fact that policies concerning work allocation in the region partly reflected traditional stereotypes, including that the main bread-earner in the family should be the man. Furthermore, as a result of the rejection of former Soviet mechanisms of economic and political governance, and the absence of alternative forms of governance, the clan reemerged as a means of distribution of political and economic leverage. Many families became dependent on the assistance of relatives living outside the regional boundaries (“the strength of weak ties”). Those who had no such links were forced to emigrate themselves. Many men have been “delayed” for years in the places to which they have migrated and have not been able to accumulate the resources necessary to finance their families’ migration. This has had a transformational effect on the social structure and role of women in Karabakh Armenian society.

## **Historical Context**

Nagorno Karabakh (i.e., Mountainous Karabakh) first emerged as the epicenter of nationalist rivalries in 1917-1920 when this strategically and symbolically important province was simultaneously claimed by Armenia and Azerbaijan, two projected nation-states that briefly emerged from the rubble of the tsarist Russian Empire. In the course of the civil war and massacres that the nationalists waged, as much as one-fifth of Nagorno Karabakh’s population perished. The bitter and frightening memories of this historical trauma, despite being harshly suppressed by official propaganda during the Soviet period, lingered among the province’s predominantly Armenian inhabitants.

In 1920-1921 the Bolshevik Red Army regained control over the whole territory of Transcaucasia and ended the independence of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The issue of control over Nagorno Karabakh presented a nasty dilemma for the new Communist Party authorities. In July 1921, an ethnic-territorial unit for the Armenian population, called the Mountainous Karabakh Autonomous Province, was created under the jurisdiction of Soviet Azerbaijan. At the time, it was hoped that this federalist compromise would defuse ethnic hostilities and, in the long run, help bring progress and enlightenment to Soviet nationalities. In particular, the Bolshevik state builders reasoned that Nagorno Karabakh would economically and culturally benefit from association with Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan’s capital city of Baku, a booming center of the oil industry, would serve as the locomotive of development that would pull rural Nagorno Karabakh out of poverty and “medieval backwardness” and thus end the irrational prejudices of the Christian-Muslim rivalry.

In reality, despite some improvements delivered through Soviet industrialization, Nagorno Karabakh remained a fairly underdeveloped rural

province in comparison to the wealthy and splendidly cosmopolitan Baku. In 1988, inspired by Mikhail Gorbachev's slogans of democratization and promises to correct all the wrongs of past Soviet rulers, the Armenian citizens of Nagorno Karabakh launched a campaign petitioning Moscow to transfer their province to the jurisdiction of ethnic Armenia – another Soviet republic separated from Nagorno Karabakh by just a narrow strip of Azerbaijani territory. This movement, however, provoked a harsh reaction among the Azerbaijanis, who saw the integrity of their own republic threatened by the Armenian secessionists. As Gorbachev's administration rapidly lost control, the Armenian-Azeri confrontation escalated from a war of words into a war between combative teenagers armed with sticks and knives and, eventually, into ethnic expulsions and pogroms. The tiny and remote region of Nagorno Karabakh unexpectedly grew into a problem that precipitated the USSR's disintegration. After 1991, the conflict escalated into a real war, with both sides using heavy weaponry and the regular armies of the newly independent Armenian and Azerbaijani states. After several years of ferocious fighting, numerous casualties, and a mass exodus of refugees, Azerbaijan effectively lost control over the self-declared Republic of Nagorno Karabakh and adjacent Azerbaijani districts, which had been conquered by the better organized and patriotically-inspired Armenian forces. In May 1994, Azerbaijan accepted an armistice that has lasted for more than a decade. However, though militarily victorious, Nagorno Karabakh emerged from the conflict poorer than ever and as an unrecognized enclave accessible only via Armenia, which itself remains blockaded from Azerbaijan. The common problems of the post-Soviet transition were thus compounded in the rebellious Nagorno Karabakh by the effects of war, the lasting blockade, and a lack of international recognition.

## **Motivations for Migration**

### **New Migration or Emigration?**

The survival-motivated migrations from Nagorno Karabakh and the rest of the Caucasus began after 1989 under the pressure of the following factors:

- 1) **Politics.** The drastic weakening of Moscow's central governance and the rise of national separatism led to devastating ethnic conflicts in many instances. After the disintegration of the USSR, migratory flows swelled to the proportions of an exodus and included a significant number of refugees from violent conflict zones.
- 2) **Economy.** The relative poverty of the Soviet era in provinces like Nagorno Karabakh turned into downright ruin, and the conflict of 1988-1994 marked the height of hardship. The Azerbaijani blockade and widespread protracted military action resulted in the massive destruction of material assets and human life: as many as 20,000 deaths were directly caused by

- 3) **Social psychology.** The fear of renewed warfare remains strong, and it is related to the persistent, though latent, apprehension of the unresolved conflict with Azerbaijan and the internationally unrecognized status of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic. Avoidance of the military draft is in itself a significant motive behind the emigration of young men. Despite the existence of a certain number of jobs in the armed forces of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic, many men see few career prospects in enlistment into a military force of indeterminate legal status that could engage in actual hostilities at any moment.
- 4) **Culture.** Among the many diverse effects of cultural perceptions are the status categories that shape the ideas of desirable or acceptable jobs. Many ethnic Armenian refugees who fled to Nagorno Karabakh from Azerbaijani territory, especially the urban middle classes and professionals from the large cosmopolitan city of Baku, found themselves compelled to lead a peasant lifestyle. Therefore, they remain likely to emigrate to territories where urban life remains vibrant and their skills could regain value. Conversely, some low-status jobs that are regarded as impossible in a refugee's homeland because of traditional rhetoric of honor and shame might become regarded as possible options away from home where "nobody knows me."

The crucial distinguishing mark of post-Soviet migration lies in the fact that it tends to become protracted up to the point of *de facto* emigration. The normal pattern of Soviet-era migration was seasonal. Male migrants sought temporary semi-formal jobs in construction, trade, and agriculture that allowed them to occasionally earn substantial sums of money and return home. Even when the jobs kept the men away from their families for longer periods, frequent visits always remained a possibility. Nowadays, such visits have become highly problematic due to the escalating cost of transportation and the newly imposed border controls between former Soviet republics. This bears a direct impact on gender relations in Nagorno Karabakh.

The erstwhile stability of Soviet times permitted the men to regularly send remittances back home which created considerable predictability as well as securely maintained spousal dependency from a distance. The inherited patriarchal system of extended family relations also remained solidly in place during times of peace and relative prosperity. Its traditional institutions and systems of kinship and gender roles could routinely and reliably provide protection for women. The husband's relatives were willing to help his wife on a daily basis, in exchange for which they enjoyed the right, and indeed the obligation, to closely supervise the conduct of the woman and her children. Last but not least, families could rely on the Soviet state's welfare provisions, such as healthcare, maternity leave, and other benefits readily available to the mothers of young children.

By contrast, during the period of chaos and traumatic socioeconomic changes which have marked post-Soviet times, oftentimes the husband cannot afford regular remittances and visits home, the husband's relatives are not particularly willing to stretch whatever remains of their resources, and the weak post-Soviet state cannot be relied upon for welfare provision. The wives of new migrants have become, in effect, virtual widows.

This dire situation forces women to devise new coping strategies instead of relying on their traditionally protected, if inevitably submissive, position in the traditional patriarchy and generates the opportunity for novel discourses. By default and often acting in desperation, these women must become resourceful and strategically inventive in order to survive on their own. At the nexus of such processes, a clash of discourses develops along the axes of traditional/dominant versus modernizing/marginal. The modernizing female emancipation discourse, which until recently was marginal, increasingly advances to the forefront and potentially may even become the new dominant discourse. Herein lies the truly crucial distinction between the old and new migrations: if the former once reinforced traditional gender roles, the latter serves to undermine them. The patriarchal bedrock of social life is crumbling down. It is, however, not at all a happy liberation.

## **Conclusions**

The main reasons for the new wave of labor migrations that arose during the post-Soviet period may be identified and ranked in order of importance as follows: pervasive unemployment and the lack of market-based opportunities in a depressed and war-torn agrarian region; the replacement of eroded formal bureaucratic structures by "clans" (nepotism) that robbed people of opportunities and marginalized the rest of society; the hovering expectation of the resumption of war with Azerbaijan; and the generalized sociopsychological frustration of Nagorno Karabakh's population in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse and ethnic conflict. These new labor migrations are driven by

desperation and the necessities of basic survival rather than the Soviet-era hope of gaining wealth to be spent to enhance the family's stature and well-being. The impact of new migrations on gender relations in the region is transformative. While Soviet migration reinforced a traditional patriarchal order, post-Soviet migration often tends to undermine that order, among other elements of the fabric of social relations in Nagorno Karabakh.

PONARS Eurasia publications are funded through the International Program of Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views expressed in these publications are those of the author alone; publication does not imply endorsement by PONARS Eurasia, Georgetown University, or the Carnegie Corporation.

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