



The difficulties of social and labour integration of people from Nagorno-Karabakh:  
A parallelism with the Greek case of Pontic Greeks and ethnic Greek Albanians migrants merged into Greece

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Now almost a year after the Stepanakert attack and the seizure of the whole of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan, reforms have taken hold in Armenia to include and support the displaced people from Karabakh, but perhaps not yet enough.

The government approved last May the housing provision program for forcibly displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Narek Mkrtchyan presented the relevant project.

Presenting the project, the minister noted that the project has three components.

"The first option involves getting a certificate to buy an apartment or a house. The second option is getting a certificate to build a house. The third option is receiving support to pay off an existing mortgage loan", Mkrtchyan said.

The amount of certificates varies depending on the number of family members and the location. "For instance, families can receive up to 5 million AMD for projects in 242 urban and rural areas, up to 4 million AMD in 148 other areas, and 3 million AMD in remaining areas, excluding specific zones in Yerevan. Additionally, those with existing mortgage loans can receive 2 million AMD, except for properties in certain zones of Yerevan", noted Mkrtchyan.

The minister also presented the main conditions of the program and who can become beneficiaries of the program.

After September, a family forcibly displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh is considered a beneficiary if all family members, including minors, have or have received the citizenship of the Republic of Armenia.

“The area of the house to be purchased should not be less than 12 square meters per family member, the price of the house to be purchased cannot exceed 55 million AMD”.

In addition to this state support program, a separate service is provided to job seekers through 49 regional offices of the Unified Social Service operating throughout the Republic of Armenia. All compatriots looking for a job can apply, receive on-the-spot counseling and be directed according to the programs. According to the deputy minister, 1,618 people have already been employed without the use of the above-mentioned components.

Zaruhi Manucharyan informed that another employment program is being implemented by the Ministry of Economy, within the framework of which the businessmen in the field of processing industry who will hire persons forcibly displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh and citizens of the Republic of Armenia will be encouraged. According to the minister's press secretary, in order to become a beneficiary of the program, one must access the SRC electronic reporting system and fill out application N282 in the "Reports" section in order to check his compliance with the program.

However, considering that the social and working context of Artsakh was rather different from the Armenian one and especially from that of Yerevan, many difficulties are still being encountered in the integration of the labour market for refugees. In Nagorno-Karabakh, most people, especially those from rural areas, have always lived in a system of temporary or even longer-term jobs sometimes offered directly by acquaintances, with no strings attached. Furthermore, as a good part of the population moved to Stepanakert in recent years, here too, apart from some activities in the central part of the city, the system has remained the same. Therefore, many forcibly displaced people do not know where and how to start their career path, especially in Yerevan. Due to the similarities of the ethnic proportions, the aspect of labour inclusion and the linguistic aspect, it may be useful to draw a parallel with the Greek case of migrations by Greek ethnic groups towards Greece, especially those of the Albanian Greeks and the Pontic Greeks.

Greece's immigrant population, including aliens and co-ethnic returnees such as Pontic Greeks and ethnic Greek Albanians (this group represents 52.7 % of the applicants in terms of requests for job positions), reaches just over one million people. This represents about 9% of the total resident population, a strikingly high percentage for a country that until only twenty years ago was a migration sender rather than host. Here there is a clear connection with Armenia, as the southern Caucasus republic is also a state with a low population (almost 3 million) and therefore, here too, the population coming from Karabakh will represent, if associated with the other populations merged into Armenia, a significant part of the entire population of the republic in recent years.

Furthermore, another aspect to be associated with the current Armenian emergency with refugees, even though we are still not talking about refugees in the Greek case, is that of the integration of the Greek Albanians as they are ethnically Greek (or in any case with Greek origins) but not holders of Greek citizenship. It is unclear how many ethnic Greek Albanians (Vorioepiotes) had already been naturalised and hence appeared as Greek citizens in the 2001 census. It is estimated that about 100,000 Albanian citizens who live in Greece have been issued with the Special Identity Card for ethnic Greeks from Albania. Today, according to our estimates, about 850,000 have legal stay and work status. The total number of undocumented aliens has thus fallen to nearly 200,000 from the half a million estimates of the mid-1990s. Among the legal immigrants, a large majority regularised

their status through the two 'amnesty' programmes mentioned above while a smaller number either came legally or took advantage of the special provisions for coethnics.

As in Armenia, the Greek government initially did not have pre-established plans to integrate the new arrivals into employment and in fact it was difficult, especially with regards to work inclusion for those people coming from the rural areas of the Balkans, presenting these a system and work mindset similar to that already discussed on Karabakh. Having reached a significant percentage of migrants, the Greek government actually issued some interesting measures, very substantially financing both recognized and unrecognized associations and organizations that operated in the sector of refining work skills. In Armenia this did not happen or it happened very little and only phenomena of spontaneous actions of Armenian civil society occurred, especially in the central-south area, such as Goris. However, despite government plans and funding, in Greece approximately 75% of the immigrant workforce in Athens is characterised by low-skilled, temporary and irregular/precarious employment regardless of their educational / professional background in their country of origin. Many are employed on a day-to-day basis, and frequently by different employers, usually in manual labour; they can therefore be easily replaced by other day-today workers. Their marginalisation in the workforce contributes to their social marginalisation and, due to the temporary character of their employment, and frequently their irregular status, does not facilitate in creating networks with their co-workers. To a degree, their status is interdependent with the general characteristics of the Greek economy and labour market. The economy is characterised by the preponderance of family-owned, small and medium sized enterprises. Such a structure is intricately connected with practices of informality (for instance by not reporting all employees on the payroll, or underreporting wages, etc) that has been estimated to reach 35-40% of Greece's GDP. These are the basic 'demand' factors for cheap, flexible labour and consequently influence the working conditions particularly of the immigrant labour force.

Another curious aspect to stress is that of language. In both cases, the Greek and Armenian, there were initially problems with language contact, as the two populations in question merged into the two republics have very strong and distinctive dialects. In Armenia, for example, there were cases where Russian was used instead of Armenian for certain circumstances. In Greece, on the other hand, apart from Greek, there was no other language of communication. This, however, was only an initial difficulty and in the Greek case, centres were actually formed to learn modern Greek for co-ethnics as well. In Armenia, the process was basically automatic by practically establishing a dialogue between the two populations and learning the differences and establishing direct understanding simply between the people.

In Armenia today, the situation is similar. Some of the refugees have entered the new Armenian labour market, but many still remain marginalised and live in precarious situations. Another critical aspect, also found in the Greek case, is the digital illiteracy of this new population. Especially the population that converged on Yerevan and the surrounding area had to interface with an aid system mainly based on online systems and methods and this, without the help of acquaintances or associations, was a hard obstacle to deal with and above all created delays in work procedures. NGOs such as Youth initiative centre and Women's found Armenia have provided and are continuing to provide a lot of aid for the forcibly displaced persons in Karabakh, especially for the most fragile groups, women and adolescents. These organisations have implemented interesting programmes

and have involved the new converged population in Armenia as much as possible. However, funding and support from the Armenian authorities is always lacking, and so in the long term there are real difficulties for these bodies, despite the good will. Therefore, for the government in Yerevan today there are complex challenges and the Greek case in parallel with Armenia explains how welcoming and integrating, especially in the world of work, even with populations of the same or original ethnicity or even compatriots, is not easy. Moreover, as the Athens data show, despite the government's interesting plans and posthumous funding, things did not go as planned, or rather, with optimal results. However, it must be said that in the long run Greek policies of funding various organisations and bodies, not only governmental ones, to help with labour inclusion for migrants has worked and today there are fewer difficulties and better situations. Therefore, Armenia could certainly, also through international aid, invest more in similar programmes and finance and support certain organisations more. What is undoubtedly needed for this, however, is a precise plan by the government with the local associations and organisations and the representatives of the Karabakh refugees.

The road still seems complicated, but if Armenia looks more to external cases for new ideas through comparisons, this will certainly help the integration process.