

IDPs in the new Georgia

by Freya von Grooten

Secession of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia in the early 1990s displaced over a quarter of a million Georgians, many of whom remain in collective shelters. As Georgia embraces democracy, what can be done to resolve the country's protracted IDP crisis?

Abkhazia, a small strip of land in northwestern Georgia that hugs the Black Sea, has traditionally been inhabited by a mix of nationalities. By the time the USSR broke up, the Abkhaz population of Abkhazia was estimated at 18%, while Georgians comprised 45%, Russians 15%, Armenians 15% and the remainder a combination of Ukrainians, Belorussians, Jews, Greeks, Azeris and Tatars. Georgia claims that the Abkhaz leadership engaged in genocide and ethnic cleansing of the Georgian population during the 1992-1993 war.

Since 1992 the UN has passed several resolutions on Abkhazia which remain unobserved. Russia, a key supporter of the Abkhaz *de facto* authorities, has entrenched the political and military stand-off between the two sides. Georgia's buffer position between NATO and Russia shapes Russia's and the USA's keen interest in the conflict. The Abkhaz authorities have maintained *de facto* independence, determined to preserve Russian support and generally refused to negotiate with the Georgian government. The Abkhaz side accuses the UN Observer Mission of political bias.

Obstacles and opportunities

In November 2003 Georgia's 'Rose Revolution', a peaceful protest at fraudulent elections, led to the replacement of the veteran leader Eduard Shevardnadze by the pro-Western Mikhail Saakashvili. Democratisation and economic reform have ushered in changes in the role and functions of civil society and IDPs. Policies which promote top-down, state-led integration have not only changed the position of IDPs within society but also altered, if not deconstructed, the significance attributed to displaced populations. The transition offers opportunities to review Georgia's strategy of state-building

and conflict transformation and to empower IDPs to actively advocate for their rights.

The viability of Georgia's democratic experiment hinges on universal civic participation and therefore, ultimately, on IDP integration. As in other displacement contexts, the issue of integration is contentious as it is associated with the possibility of compromising the principle of right to return. In the case of Georgia, however, it appears that social, economic and political integration may empower IDPs to participate in shaping policies that may eventually enable them to assert such a right.

The Abkhaz government in exile, which is supposed to represent the interests of internally displaced Georgians, is due to move its headquarters closer to Abkhazia, transferring from the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, to Zugdidi in western Georgia. It remains to be seen whether the government in exile can overcome the legacy of alleged corruption during the Shevardnadze era and truly advocate for IDP rights. The fact that its leaders are not elected but appointed by the Georgian President weakens its claim to legitimacy. The Abkhaz authorities refuse to recognise it as a negotiation partner.

Georgia continues to be overwhelmed by the economic consequences of the break-up of the former Soviet Union, the legacy of civil strife, mass displacement and anger at loss of sovereignty. Approximately 40% of the displaced population live in collective centres, often located in former hotels, schools, factories and hospitals. According to UN OCHA, 70% of the collective centres in Georgia do not meet minimum living standards. Unemployment, alcoholism, high depression and suicide rates and bad health are commonplace. An increasing number of IDPs

previously living in private accommodation have moved to collective centres as a result of decreasing willingness of local families to host them and their inability to pay rents as they sink further into poverty. Georgia's privatisation programme is leading to the removal of IDPs from public buildings occupying prime real-estate sites. Until recently the Iveria Hotel in Tbilisi's main square housed thousands of IDPs and was an iconic daily reminder to Georgians and the world of the unresolved conflict. Compensation for those forced to lose their shelter has been *ad hoc*.

Return of IDPs to Abkhazia has been promoted as the only acceptable solution by the Georgian authorities and by IDPs themselves. This position resulted in the creation of special rules for IDPs which in many ways have denied them rights granted to other citizens and forced them to live under conditions of legal discrimination. It was only in 2002 that the reform of the election code restored the right of IDPs to vote in local and parliamentary elections. Distribution of entitle-



ments – including to free electricity and public transport – has been a lucrative source of income for corrupt bureaucrats.

Many argue that IDPs have been kept in the dark about their rights and entitlements by those who have benefited from administering assistance programmes. They have helped create a dependency mentality among IDPs which has reinforced their social (self-) segregation and communal introversion. During the years of displacement IDPs have increasingly adopted a defiant, yet passive, victim identity but without developing forms of group solidarity or effective collective association. As other Georgians have also seen their living standards falling, they have come to regard the displaced with increasing irritation and fading sympathy.

Georgia's new government is undertaking a census of the IDP population with assistance from UNHCR. It is unclear whether this is a genuine planning tool, or driven by anti-corruption fervour, a need to rationalise budgets by weeding out non-existent and fraudulent beneficiaries or the desire to reduce IDP numbers and make the right to return less politically contentious.

Future prospects

Despite the political logjam, there are some grounds for optimism. The new political reality holds significant potential for the emancipation of the IDP community in the medium to long term. Integration of the IDP community into society at large could provide IDPs with a window of opportunity to realise their rights as citizens, as well as to eventually actively participate in the peace process as members of a democratic society.

Having realised that a resolution of the conflict is not imminent, the Saakashvili government has recognised the need for domestic social consolidation as a foundation stone to enable democratic dialogue and peacemaking. Grass roots and civil society organisations are gaining confidence and developing greater influence over events. The government is aware of the need to win over the increasingly embittered and fearful Abkhaz minority and to offer incentives to make return to Georgia preferable to continued reliance on Russia. IDP leaders now simply express a desire to return and do not talk of revenge. In recent years, with the improvement of a return environment supported by the international community, small groups of

Georgian IDPs have returned home spontaneously, mainly to the eastern Abkhaz district of Gali, if only on a seasonal basis.

The government is trying to break the dependency mentality of IDPs and now actively encourages donors to shift their attention from humanitarian assistance towards development. The psychological shock of the new policies is significant yet there is already evidence of attitudinal change. Some IDPs no longer hark back to memories of “how we lived” but have started talking of “how we will live again”.

Actions need to be taken to maintain momentum and channel expectations responsibly:

- IDPs must be given greatly improved access to information.
- IDPs must be socially better integrated and their capacities to participate increased.
- IDPs must be more involved in the political process.
- Economic policies must be shaped with reference to the need to protect IDP rights, particularly related to housing.

What we are seeing in Georgia can be seen as the ‘secularisation’ of the IDP and a new social pragmatism rooted in a firm neo-liberal economic framework. The extent to which raised expectations can be reconciled with the recognition that no return will occur in the short term and the willingness of IDPs themselves to adapt to new realities cannot be foreseen. Recent developments have implications for policies in other states suffering from crises of internal displacement. The continued support of the international community is pivotal.

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For further information, see the Global IDP Project's Georgia page: www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/idpSurvey.nsf/wCountries/Georgia

IDPs from Abkhazia living in what used to be the Hotel Iveria, turned into a communal centre, Tbilisi, Georgia.

