

Europe's IDPs still marginalised

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To bring an end to displacement for some 2.5 million IDPs in Europe, governments' focus on return must be broadened to include support and assistance for local integration and settlement elsewhere in the country.

As those IDPs able to do so have returned to their places of origin or integrated elsewhere, those who remain in situations of protracted internal displacement in Europe tend to be among the most vulnerable – generally poor, unemployed, without assets and living in inadequate temporary shelter, with little or no support.

The majority of IDPs in the region now live in towns and cities. Some initially took refuge in urban areas, while others gradually moved there in search of jobs and better living conditions and services. Many live with relatives or friends in crowded conditions. In response to growing urbanisation, some governments in the region have enforced limitations on migration to cities. In Azerbaijan and Russia, IDPs who migrate to certain cities are unable to register their residence and are therefore cut off from formal employment, government assistance, medical services, education and pensions. While not targetting IDPs specifically, this policy has a particular impact on them.

Some governments in the region have highlighted the plight of IDPs; others – for political reasons – have denied their existence. In order to support the claim to territory not currently under their control, some governments (Azerbaijan, Georgia and Serbia) have been pushing for the return of IDPs at the expense of local integration. While compromising other durable solutions, this focus on return can support other political aims including the reversal of the effects of war such as ethnic cleansing. This is the reason why in Bosnia and Herzegovina it has been very difficult to support solutions other than return.¹ Other governments (Armenia, Russia and Turkey) have denied the scale of displacement in an effort to portray

the situation as solved and to direct international attention elsewhere.

Also characteristic of protracted internal displacement in Europe is the disproportionate number of court decisions made against IDPs of certain ethnicities, while donor and media fatigue in respect of internal displacement in Europe, as elsewhere, contribute to the neglect of the remaining IDPs.

Rights and vulnerabilities

IDPs in the region continue to struggle to acquire the documents needed to access their rights. IDP cards were issued in several countries to substitute for lost documents and give access to certain government benefits but some IDPs cannot access rights not covered by the IDP card. Many displaced pensioners receive a lower pension than they are entitled to because the necessary documents and their records were destroyed during the conflicts or they could not prove the number of years they had worked.

More than 15 years after being displaced, a large number of IDPs still live in inadequate and precarious conditions in various types of housing, including makeshift shelters, illegally occupied dwellings, collective centres and apartments shared with relatives. In many cases, conditions are run down and crowded with little protection from the heat and cold. Some IDPs live in shelters that they neither own nor rent and are at risk of eviction. Many IDPs displaced in remote rural areas must also contend with infertile land and distance from job opportunities and essential services. Living conditions of IDPs in private accommodation are largely unknown. Improvement of living conditions has often been avoided because authorities perceived it as encouraging IDPs

to integrate locally which does not always serve their political agenda.

Many IDPs continue to encounter problems in repossessing or being compensated for their property, in some countries due to the absence of political solutions to the conflicts there. Both property restitution and property compensation schemes have had reasons for not benefiting all of the dispossessed. People who never possessed title to their property have especially had difficulty with property restitution; this is particularly the case for Roma living in informal settlements and for women whose houses were registered under the names of their husbands. Roma IDPs are disproportionately affected by the lack of documentation since many never had identification documents or a legal residence and so cannot apply for an IDP card, register new births, apply for citizenship, access social benefits and obtain employment or education.

In the Balkans, Roma suffer from widespread discrimination in various sectors of public life. Their treatment and living conditions deteriorated with displacement but there has been some progress recently in better representing and defending the interests of the Roma and improving their living conditions. Other IDPs who are ethnic minorities in their area of displacement face discrimination. It is difficult for ethnic Chechens in Russia and Kurds in Turkey, for example, to lead a normal life in displacement. People who fled areas where they were an ethnic minority and who went to areas where they were part of the ethnic majority face more subtle discrimination as they are often viewed as non-locals even years after their arrival. This treatment of IDPs highlights the outstanding need for further efforts to combat discrimination and promote reconciliation in the region.

The disruption of education for internally displaced children remains an issue mostly in the Caucasus and Turkey. Displaced children are legally entitled to attend school but

some children are being educated in schools damaged by conflict that have yet to be repaired while others do not go at all since many IDPs, being poorer than their neighbours, cannot afford associated costs such as transport, textbooks and school supplies for their children. Displaced children in some countries are being educated separately from their non-displaced peers. While in some cases this is for practical reasons, in other cases – in Azerbaijan and Georgia, for example – segregation has been a deliberate policy.

While some IDPs have been vulnerable since the beginning of their displacement, the vulnerability of others has increased over time as a result of family separation, lack of support to address their specific needs, and social stigmatisation; they include people who are traumatised, disabled or chronically ill, female heads of household, children and the elderly. The lack of comprehensive psychosocial and other support programmes for traumatised and disabled IDPs sustains their marginalisation. The truly disadvantaged are those who have also lost the financial, physical and moral support of extended family, friends and other networks. They risk desperate poverty as well as exploitation and abuse. Feelings of insecurity and isolation due to war and uncertainty about the future stand in the way of self-reliance. Their situation is aggravated by high rates of unemployment in most areas of displacement in the region as the local economies continue to recover from conflict. Many displaced families therefore survive on government benefits and food assistance.

The resulting challenges to the sustainability of return promote further internal migration of returnees.

Support for local integration and resettlement

While many governments have demonstrated political will and have allocated resources for return, the same has not always been true for local integration. Where states are trying to push IDPs to return, they appear to restrict opportunities for self-reliance, which in turn hampers local integration and reinforces the situation of IDPs as marginalised,

dependent on aid and feeling out of place. The exception is Cyprus, where the government of the Republic has facilitated local integration of IDPs since the beginning, while simultaneously advocating that they be able to return to their homes.² Other governments have changed their approach over time. Georgia, for example, has acknowledged the right of IDPs to local integration in its National IDP Strategy and Turkey did the same in a national strategy framework document in 2005. This marked a significant promise of departure from the previous government approach.

Given the political obstacles to return, the profile of those still displaced and the emergence of a second generation that has often never visited their parents' place of origin, it is high time for governments to expand their exclusive support for return to include other durable solutions. Support of local integration and settlement elsewhere in the country will strengthen the ability of IDPs to return on a sustainable basis once political obstacles are removed if they so wish. IDPs will be more able to make a truly voluntary choice about whether to return if they are able to live a normal life now.

As protracted situations of displacement are usually characterised by a relatively stable IDP population in terms of numbers and locations, efforts should be made to regularly assess their conditions, needs and plans with regard to durable solutions other than return. The lack of basic information about IDPs seeking durable solutions other than return is a serious impediment to resolving protracted internal displacement situations in Europe. Involving IDPs would help move the search for solutions in the right direction.

Recommendations to governments:

- More actively pursue local integration and settlement elsewhere in the countries concerned.
- Establish institutional mechanisms and facilitated procedures for issuing or re-issuing essential documentation to IDPs, including by using alternative forms of

evidence available to IDPs, and initiate civil registration campaigns for IDPs particularly affected by the lack of documentation.

- Ensure that social welfare systems can benefit IDPs in need of assistance with a special emphasis on housing and livelihood opportunities.
- Undertake a profiling exercise to determine the level of achievement of durable solutions and the obstacles facing the remaining IDPs living in government-provided and private accommodation in urban and rural areas.
- More consistently consult and involve IDPs in the design of policies and programmes addressing their needs and preferences for durable solutions, as well as peace processes.

Recommendations to humanitarian organisations:

- Improve the housing conditions of IDPs in collective centres and makeshift housing in rural and urban areas.
- Provide assistance to ensure that displaced children face no financial barriers to attending school.
- Monitor the achievement of durable solutions for IDPs who have returned, integrated locally or settled elsewhere in the country.
- Advocate for the establishment of reconciliation mechanisms.
- Support the capacity of national human rights institutions to encourage governments to address the limited access of IDPs to their rights.

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See Protracted Internal Displacement in Europe: Current Trends and Ways Forward, at <http://www.internal-displacement.org/europe>.

1. See Mooney article pp22-24.
2. See Loizos article pp40-41.